



SRI AUROBINDO INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE OF EDUCATION
PONDICHERRY

Sri Aurobindo

a biography and a history

Volume One

by

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar

M.A., D. Litt.

Vice-President, Sahitya Akademi

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Publishers' Note

We are happy to publish the present third edition of the biography of Sri Aurobindo by Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar. Since its first publication in 1945 this has been the standard work on the subject. Now entirely recast and largely re-written and brought up-to-date, and enlarged to about thrice the original size, this third edition is practically a new work, oriented towards the birth centenary on 15 August 1972.

We have also pleasure in acknowledging the grant given by the Government of India to our Centre of Education to meet the cost of publication of this book.

21 March 1972

to the Mother

*“A mother to our wants,
a friend in our difficulties,
a persistent and tranquil
counsellor and mentor,
chasing away with her radiant smile
the clouds of gloom
and fretfulness and depression,
reminding always of the ever-present help,
pointing to the eternal sunshine,
she is firm, quiet and persevering
in the deep and continuous urge
that drives us towards
the integrality of
the higher nature.”¹*

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*Parts III & IV and Epilogue
appear as Volume II*

P R E F A C E

The first edition of this book was published on 21 February 1945. When I started work on it late in 1942, I was not slow to realise that the biographer of Sri Aurobindo had himself to be a poet and a prophet, a philosopher and a Yogi; and being fully conscious of my limitations, I knew that the task I had undertaken greatly exceeded my abilities. Nevertheless I persevered, benefiting by encouragement, counsel and criticism from several friends in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, and it was my unique good fortune that Sri Aurobindo himself was magnanimous enough to go through my first and second drafts of February 1943 and November 1943 respectively, rectifying many errors whether of fact or interpretation. In the result, the book was received warmly as a reliable first introduction to Sri Aurobindo's life and work.

The second edition appeared on 21 February 1950. In preparing it for the press, I had retained the main text of the first edition, but I had also tried to make it up-to-date by introducing additional matter here and there, and supplying a few more footnotes.

Although the second edition sold out not long afterwards, and although there were calls for a new edition, for about twenty years I found myself unable to return to this task. During this period a great deal of valuable material came to light, and a large mass of Sri Aurobindo's own writings — prose as well as poetry — was posthumously published. In his *Life of Sri Aurobindo* (which has gone into three editions), the late Sri Ambalal B. Purani put together the numerous findings of his indefatigable research. Both Purani and Nirodbaran have also

published the personal records they had maintained of Sri Aurobindo's, conversations with his disciples at Pondicherry; and yet another record of the talks, the condensed version by Veluri Chidanandam, has been appearing serially in *Mother India*. Besides, thanks to the dedicated labours of disciples like Nolini Kanta Gupta, K. D. Sethna and Kishor Gandhi, an increasing number of Sri Aurobindo's poems, plays, translations, essays, commentaries, letters and miscellaneous literary fragments have been deciphered, edited and given to the world. And now the definitive Centenary Edition of Sri Aurobindo's Works in thirty large volumes is in progress, and is expected to be completed before 15 August 1972.

While I no doubt tried desperately to keep in touch with this growing literature — both writing by Sri Aurobindo and writing on Sri Aurobindo — the idea of a third edition of my biography nevertheless filled me with grave misgivings. It was clear that a casual or piecemeal revision wouldn't serve the purpose. With each succeeding year, the task only became more and more difficult, and I felt correspondingly inadequate and was afraid even to make a beginning. I realised too that I could look for no respite so long as I consented to be shackled to the arduous tasks of university teaching or administration.

Having at last — towards the end of 1968 — divested myself of the Vice-Chancellorship of Andhra University, I found a place of retreat and an harbour of peace in the Delhi Branch of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. And there, after some more delays caused by the pressure of other literary work, I started hopefully and resolutely on 15 August 1970. While the old ground-plan was more or less retained, in the superstructure it was to be practi-

cally a new book now — a Biography and a History — and so the work, once begun, made slow if steady progress. After the first chapter there was a break, when I paid a visit to the South; returning to Delhi, I wrote the next twelve chapters in one long spell during September-November 1970; after another break, between January and April 1971 I completed the next twelve chapters — all in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, New Delhi. The last three chapters, however, were written at my daughter, Prema Nandakumar's place in Visakhapatnam during July-August, and on the morning of 15 August 1971 I reached the last page and heaved a sigh of delighted relief. Presently I made the pilgrimage to Pondicherry in the company of Padmasani my wife, and on an auspicious morning early in September made an offering of the typescript — the modest harvest of our aspiration and striving — to the Gracious Mother. It was Grace indeed — what else? — that such should have been the consummation of our effort and faith

If the “onlie true begetter” of the first edition was the late Shri Shankargauda B. Patil, my dear friend of Belgaum days, the “onlie true begetter” of this new “Biography and History” is Shri Surendra Nath Jauhar of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, New Delhi, who created the right conditions for me and enveloped me with understanding and love. True and devoted sons of the Mother, they have been to me elder brothers beyond cavil and beyond compare.

For the rest, my debt to my friends in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, and its Delhi Branch, is incommensurable, and since to go into detail must make the Preface endless, I have reluctantly to satisfy myself with this collective expression of my heartfelt gratitude. I have

also heavily drawn upon published and other sources, and I have indicated my indebtedness, generally in the Bibliography, and more particularly in the footnotes.

It has not been possible to follow a uniform scheme of page-references in the footnotes. As regards Sri Aurobindo's own writings, the pagination usually differs from edition to edition, and I have had to refer only to the editions immediately accessible to me; and some works — *Collected Poems and Plays*, for example — have long been out of print. For *Savitri* and for the major prose works I have generally used the uniform Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education Collection. Once the Centenary Edition is completed, it should be possible to standardise the pagination, and I do hope that, when the time comes for me to prepare the next edition of my book, I would be able to make all the references only to the definitive Centenary Edition. Again, Purani's *Life of Sri Aurobindo* has gone through three editions, but my references (except where otherwise clearly indicated) are to the second (1960) edition alone.

No elaborate apology is needed, perhaps, either for the inclusion of fairly detailed discussions of Sri Aurobindo's writings or for the occasional repetitions and recapitulations in the course of the book or yet for describing it as "a Biography and a History". In Sri Aurobindo's life, his writing was not a thing apart; it was (in the Miltonic phrase, but in an even truer sense) "the precious life-blood of a master spirit". The inner man was the real man, and the inner man is best revealed for us in his writing. Poetry, drama, philosophy, Yoga exegesis, political comment, sociological inquiry, literary and art criticism, educational theory — every-

where there is the signature of the inner man, the light from the inner Sun, the tremor of the unique Sensibility. If it be true, as Keats said, that "Shakespeare led a life of allegory, his works are his comments on 'it'", might it not be said of Sri Aurobindo that his was a life of progressive Divine manifestation, and his writings are but its radiations and recordings?

In a book of this size aiming at all-inclusiveness, some repetition is unavoidable and could even be purposeful, and periodic recapitulations become almost a necessity. The shifts and alternations in theme—the man and the milieu, the inner and the outer life, literature and politics, war and peace, philosophy and Yoga—may seem a little bewildering without a measure of interior stitching to hold it all together as a composite and integral whole. It is a single life yet, but its divers strands, for all the apparent criss-crossing, are meant to coalesce into an intricate fabric of paramount significance.

As for the sub-title, even as Sri Aurobindo's writings are not isolable from his Life, his Life too is not easily isolable from the mainstream of Indian and world history. His Sun-like effulgence shot out in many directions and made its mark everywhere, clearing the mists, cleansing, destroying, revitalising, transfiguring, and what was brick before now became charged with new life and what was mere tinsel came to be alchemised into gold. The period of his active participation in politics was but a few years: but both before and after, Sri Aurobindo sent out creepers of influence far and wide, not the less effective although this action was not open, or was encompassed only through means other than material. The whole story is not known, or cannot be told yet; but

even what is set forth in the following pages will, I venture to hope, bear out the claim that in his time Sri Aurobindo successfully invoked Bhavani Bharati as the irresistible force of national resurgence and played for our age the crucial role of leader of humanity's evolving destiny.

The book having grown to more than three times the size of the earlier edition, it became necessary to bring it out in two volumes racing against time. It is thus a pleasure and a duty to thank the Manager and Staff of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, for undertaking and completing in the spirit of *sadhana* the difficult task of producing this rather voluminous work both expeditiously and efficiently. It is also peculiarly appropriate that this book should be published under the auspices of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in the Sri Aurobindo Centenary Year.

K. R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR

Sri Aurobindo Ashram
(Delhi Branch)
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12 March 1972

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

RENASCENT INDIA AND SRI AUROBINDO

I

When, by the end of the eighteenth century, the foreigner consolidated his power in India, the country was to all appearance a spiritual "waste land". The Western impact on the Orient had completed the discomfiture of the latter; the old order was seemingly dead, the new one could not be as much as thought of — and only a terrible stupor prevailed, paralysing the secret springs of the nation's high creative endeavour.

For nearly three thousand years — or more — India had been in the vanguard of human civilisation. She had, almost continuously, thrown out with exuberant self-confidence an amazing variety of literatures, philosophies, schools of painting and architecture and dancing and music, sound systems of government, fruitful traditions in medicine and engineering, and the elaborate sciences of grammar, mathematics, chemistry and astronomy. "One of the oldest races and greatest civilisations on this earth, the most indomitable in vitality, the most fecund in greatness, the deepest in life, the most wonderful in potentiality", India had taken into itself "numerous sources of strength from foreign strains of blood and other types of human civilisation", and over a long stretch of years dared gloriously and raced forward adventurously.¹ Wave upon wave of invasion had passed over the vast sub-continent, but the stream of Indian

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of the Karmayogin* (1950), p. 1.

culture, deep and broad at once, had pursued its august and serene course, little affected by the periodic spurts of foam or froth on the undulating surface. How, then, was the miracle — for miracle surely it was — of such abundant vitality preserved over so enormous a stretch of time? How did such vitality manage ever to tame the upsurging forces of disintegration into submission or to force even out of them new syntheses, new harmonies, new creations? The answer stares us in the face if we correctly read the story of the rise and fulfilment of ancient Indian civilisation:

- Her first period was luminous with the discovery of the Spirit; her second completed the discovery of Dharma; her third elaborated into detail the first simple formulation of the Shastra; but none was exclusive, the three elements are always present.

In this third period the curious elaboration of all life into a science and an art assumed extraordinary proportions.... On one side there is an insatiable curiosity, the desire of life to know itself in every detail, on the other a spirit of organisation and scrupulous order, the desire of the mind to tread through life with a harmonised knowledge and in the right rhythm and measure. Thus an ingrained and dominant spirituality, an inexhaustible vital creativeness and gust of life and, mediating between them, a powerful, penetrating and scrupulous intelligence combined of the rational, ethical and aesthetic mind each at a high intensity of action, created the harmony of the ancient Indian culture.²

At the time of the Vedic dawn, the Rishis, the seer-poets, having already won their way to the triune vi-

² Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India* (1951), pp. 13, 15.

sion of *satyam-rtam-brhat* (the True, the Right, the Vast), opened the eyes of the people to the Flame that lights up the dark spaces of consciousness and liberates the soul long cabinned in its impotent (if also self-forged) separativity. The Rishis sang, the Rishis exhorted, the Rishis led the way:

A perfect path of the Truth
has come into being
for our journey
to the other shore
beyond the darkness.³

Beholding the higher Light
beyond the darkness
we come to the divine Sun
in the Godhead,
to the highest Light of all.⁴

We have crossed through
to the other shore
of this darkness,
Dawn is breaking forth,
and she creates and forms
the births of Knowledge.⁵

Awake, O Souls, arise!
strength has come,
darkness has passed away —
the Light is arriving.⁶

This was more than poetry, this was revelation, this was the recordation of the dynamics of spiritual action. It is easy to get lost in the hymnal wealth of the Rig Veda

³ Rig Veda (Translation by Sri Aurobindo), I 46.11.

⁴ *ibid.*, I. 50.10. ⁵ *ibid.*, I. 92 6. ⁶ *ibid.*, VII.76.4.

— over 1,000 poems and 10,000 verses. But with this clue to the labyrinth, one might venture unafraid into the Veda's symbolistic world:

...the central idea of the Vedic Rishis was the transition of the human soul from a state of death to a state of immortality by the exchange of the Falsehood for the Truth, of divided and limited being for integrality and infinity. Death is the mortal state of Matter with Mind and Life involved in it; Immortality is a state of infinite being, consciousness and bliss. Man rises beyond the two firmaments, *rodasi*, Heaven and Earth, mind and body, to the infinity of the Truth, Mahas, and so to the divine Bliss. This is the "great passage" discovered by the Ancestors, the ancient Rishis.⁷

Seer-poets like Vishwamitra, Vasishtha, Vamadeva, Dirghatamas, Madhuchandas, Bharadwaja and Medhatithi were indeed ecstasies, diviners, poets, illuminants and law-givers rolled in one, and the Indian mind has always — and especially in times of perplexity or distress — turned back to the Vedic home of origins and its springs of perennial Truth.

In the Upanishadic Age that followed, the marvellous insights of the Veda acquired clearer definition, and intuitive seeing went hand in hand with logical reasoning to structure those superb dialectics, those Himalayas of striving and realisation, that have since compelled the awe and admiration of the world. There is an utter incandescent finality in affirmations like —

He whose self has become all existences
(for he has the knowledge),
how shall he be deluded?

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *On the Veda*, p. 53.

He who sees everywhere oneness,
whence shall he have grief?⁸

Verily, O Gargi,
at the command of the Imperishable
the sun and the moon stand apart
the earth and the sky stand apart
the moments, hours, days, nights, fortnights,
months, seasons, years
stand apart...⁹

For who could live or breathe
if there were not this delight of existence
as the ether in which we dwell?
From Delight all these beings are born,
by Delight they exist and grow,
to Delight they return.¹⁰

Through self-mastery to world-mastery, from the science of the Self to the technology of social well-being — such was the fool-proof sequence of inner and outer mastery, inner realisation and outer fulfilment.

In the next Age — the Indian “Heroic Age” imaged in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* — there was a further significant development. It is of course difficult (if not impossible) to dissociate mythic from historic truth, but mythic truth — the truth of Rama’s fight with the Rakshasa, the truth of Krishna’s singular ministry on the field of Kurukshetra — verily transcends history.¹¹ And

⁸ *Isha*, 7.

⁹ *Brihadaranyaka*, III.viii.3ff.

¹⁰ *Taittiriya*, II.7; III.6.

¹¹ cf. Sri Aurobindo: “If the Christ, God made man, lives within our spiritual being, it would seem to matter little whether or not a son of Mary physically lived and suffered and died in Judaea. So too the Krishna who

so we find reared upon the foundations of Veda and Upanishad the crowning edifice of the Bhagavad Gita, the harmony of the three great means and powers of *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma* — Knowledge, Love and Works — through which man may infallibly achieve both self-realisation and world-redemption. It would be unwise to tear the *Gita* from its Kurukshetra context, for the *Gita* is not only a wide-ranging treatise on ethical doctrine and spiritual philosophy but also — and no less pointedly — a complete (and apparently convincing) answer to the problem of facing an acute crisis in human life. The crisis recurs from time to time, for we too find ourselves unpredictably trapped in our own Kurukshetras; we are overcome by sudden distress, we feel paralysed in body and mind, we are cast down by despair. But the *Gita* still comes to us with terrific urgency, giving us a shot in the arm and energising us into right and resolute action.

In the days of its plenitude, Indian civilisation took equal note of the primacy of the Spirit and the immediate claims of phenomenal life. Life was a movement, a progression, a battle; and life was complex, and human nature was complex. Whether for individual or collective man, the key to progressive development lay in the realisation of inner unity and the willing acceptance of the play of outer variety. *Ātma-vidyā*, certainly; but also the minutiae of Dharma — “special for the special person, stage of development, pursuit of life or individual field of action, but universal too in the broad lines which all ought to pursue”.¹² The culture of ancient India was a

matters to us is the eternal incarnation of the Divine and not the historical teacher and leader of men.” (*Essays on the Gita*, p. 18)

¹² Sri Aurobindo, *Foundations of Indian Culture* (1953), p. 119.

grand synthesis indeed, a field where patterns of order — like the four graded classes (Varnas) of society and the four successive stages (Ashramas) of a developing human life — permitted abundant variation within them and where heaven found a kin-soil on the earth:

Indian culture raised the crude animal life of desire, self-interest and satisfied propensity beyond its first intention to a noble self-exceeding and shapeliness by infusing into it the order and high aims of the Dharma. But its profounder characteristic aim — and in this it was unique — was to raise this nobler life too of the self-perfecting human being beyond its own intention to a mightiest self-exceeding and freedom.... Not a noble but ever death-bound manhood is the highest height of man's perfection: immortality, freedom, divinity are within his grasp....

On this first firm and noble basis Indian civilisation grew to its maturity and became a thing rich, splendid and unique. While it filled the view with the last mountain prospect of a supreme spiritual elevation, it did not neglect the life of the levels. It lived between the busy life of the city and village, the freedom and seclusion of the forest and the last overarching illimitable ether. Moving firmly between life and death, it saw beyond both and cut out a hundred high roads to immortality. It developed the external nature and drew it into the inner self; it enriched life to raise it into the spirit. Thus founded, thus trained, the ancient Indian race grew to astonishing heights of culture and civilisation; it lived with a noble, well-based, ample and vigorous order and freedom; it developed a great literature, sciences, arts, crafts, industries; it rose to the highest possible ideals and

no mean practice of knowledge and culture, of arduous greatness and heroism, of kindness, philanthropy and human sympathy and oneness; it laid the inspired basis of wonderful spiritual philosophies; it examined the secrets of external nature and discovered and lived the boundless and miraculous truths of inner being; it fathomed self and understood and possessed the world.¹⁸

It was a delicate balance, but as long as it was maintained, people lived freely and purposively, participating in the delight of existence, and fairly poised between the kindred points of earth and heaven.

Yet human situations are far from static and every Age needs its own creative synthesis, its own clue to dynamic action. The march of time erupts a succession of challenges, and these challenges must needs be met and mastered and gathered into a new — a more comprehensive — synthesis, a more infallible engine of integral action. When that fails to happen, the process of decadence must start and gather increasing momentum from the shock of every successive challenge. Such times are marked by the persistence of 'forms' but the ignorance of the spirit behind them, the preoccupation with intellectual debate, personal advancement and egoistic assertion, and the loss of the wider vision and the inattention to the greater good. Following that glorious Age of creative harmony, India did go through a period of decadence, a time of narrow ends and muddled means, of individual decay and social disruption. At first, it was no more than a slight disturbance of the old delicate balance: a shift towards *artha* and *kāma* and away from *dharma* and *moksa*, a craving for luxury and artificia-

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 121, 133.

lity, and a cultivated distaste for the older simplicity and humanity; also an excessive assertion of this-worldliness — or a frantic and total retreat to other-worldliness. Soon the evils became more pronounced, and it needed Gautama Siddharta the Buddha, with his message of freedom and gospel of compassion, to restore *dhamma* and re-establish *sangha*.

The Buddha made Asoka possible, and even after Asoka, in the Age of the Imperial Guptas, India retained much of her vitality, strength and mastery of the arts of life and the key to the kingdoms of the Greater Life. For about 1,000 years since the beginning of the Christian era, Indian culture was a living thing, an expression of the sanity, vitality and intellectual keenness of the Indian people; and although sophistication set in and proliferated, the links with the spirit were not snapped:

It is still and always spiritual, philosophical, religious, ethical, but the inner austerer things seem to draw back a little and to stand in the background... It is the great period of logical philosophy, of science, of art and the developed crafts, law, politics, trade, colonisation, the great kingdoms and empires with their ordered and elaborate administrations, the minute rule of the Shastras in all departments of thought and life, an enjoyment of all that is brilliant, sensuous, agreeable, a discussion of all that could be thought and known, a fixing and systemising of all that could be brought into the compass of intelligence and practice, — the most splendid, sumptuous and imposing millennium of Indian culture.¹⁴

Then came Islam. The Punjab, all North India, and even

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 333-4.

South India felt the effects of the traumatic impact of invader, conqueror and proselytiser. Hinduism was still deeply entrenched, certainly in South India, but also in many parts of North India. In areas of Muslim domination and persecution, however, the average Hindu was apt to feel demoralised. On the other hand, the divine singers of Tamil Nad, the Virasaivas and Dasas of Andhra-Karnatak, the Sants of Maharashtra, and the followers of divers bhakti cults in Assam, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and the Punjab did keep the embers of spirituality alive and hold the people together even in those dark dark days. The Muslim rulers (with notable exceptions) were a prey to ambition, greed and fanaticism, and fought among themselves as well as oppressed their Hindu subjects; and the Hindu rulers and ruling classes were no better. Generally speaking, India during the period of Muslim domination (except for brief oases like the reign of Akbar) was a desert of bleak unease and poverty of spirit. Guru Nanak's description of his own times (fifteenth to sixteenth century) may be said to fit the whole period almost:

In this Kali age

flaming passion is the chariot
and falsehood the charioteer...

(*Asa*, 470);

This Kali age is like a drawn knife

with butchers for kings;
and righteousness has taken wings;
in this dark night of total falsehood,
the Moon of Truth isn't visible....
How shall deliverance be secured?

(*Var Majh*, 145):

This distinguishes the Kali age:
the tyrant is readily approved....

(*Ramkali*, 902).

In language so familiar to Indian thought, the country was getting enveloped more and more in "tāmasic ignorance and rājasic impulsion".¹⁵ It was an Asuric age, native Asuras fought among themselves and fought the foreign Asuras, forced the sāttvic men into obscurity and brought about the reign of *tāmas*.

At the time of the Muslim advent, the widespread knowledge had already begun to shrink and the Rajputs who were predominantly rajasic occupied the throne of India. Northern India was in the grip of wars and internal quarrels and, owing to the decadence of Buddhism, Bengal was overcome with tamas. Spirituality sought refuge in South India and by the grace of that sattvic power South India was able to retain her freedom for a long time. Yearning for knowledge, progress of knowledge slowly declined, instead, erudition was more and more honoured and glorified; spiritual knowledge, development of yogic power and inner realisation were mostly replaced by tamasic religious worship and observance of rajasic ceremonies to gain worldly ends.... Such an extinction of the national dharma had brought about the death of Greece, Rome, Egypt and Assyria, but the Aryan race... was saved by the rejuvenating flow of heavenly nectar which gushed from time to time from the ancient source. Shankara, Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Nanak, Ramdas and Tukaram brought back to life a moribund India by sprinkling her with

¹⁵ From Sri Aurobindo's Bengali article on 'The Problem of the Past', as translated by Niranjana in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1967, p. 96.

that divine nectar. However, the current of rajas and tamas was so strong that by its pull, even the best were altered into the worst.... In the eighteenth century this current attained its maximum force.... Power was not lacking in the country, but owing to the eclipse of the Aryan dharma and of sattwa, that power unable to defend itself, brought about its own destruction. Finally, the Asuric power of India, vanquished by the Asuric power of Britain, became shackled and lifeless. India plunged into an inert sleep of tamas.¹⁶

The decadence of the brahman caste that was ready enough to compromise on both ends and means, the decline of the warrior kshatriya caste that lost its high ideals and its native vigour, the precarious predicament of the 'lower' orders in those times of political uncertainty and economic chaos, the steady obscuration of ethical lights, the general weakening of family and community ties, all contributed to India's ignoble and fallen condition in the eighteenth century and after. In Sisir Kumar Mitra's words,

There were corruptions in every walk of life, social, cultural and political. Bengal seemed to be slowly sinking into a morass of decay and degeneration. Not only in Bengal, this tendency prevailed more or less in the whole of India, and its evils crept into the entire life of the Indian people, the forms and institutions of which were either dead or dying.¹⁷

The native vitality and robust zest for life that had once seemed verily inexhaustible now showed clear signs of

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

¹⁷ *Resurgent India* (1963), p. 31.

emasculatation and drying up, the sustaining force of spirituality seemed to have retreated to the farthest interior, and the old subtle mechanism of intelligence seemed to be too easily put out of action by the shock of new phenomena. And so — with a fatal rapidity — the centrifugal forces defiantly asserted themselves, the blood-streams of culture ceased to flow as of old with their innate gusto, and Bharatavarsha became anaemic and wasted and diseased and degraded. It looked as though the twin movements, Vaishnavite and Saivite, for the revival of Hinduism, and the movement of Sufism in Islam, had also lost their great spiritual drive, and only a memory of god-intoxicated singers like Eknath and Kabir and Tulsi Das and Chaitanya and Farid and Nanak lay behind to keep the obscured embers of Indian spirituality yet alive. Palsied in its outer forms, miserably racked within, breathing but an atmosphere of violence or sloth and caught helplessly in the tangle of oppression and sword-law, the condition of India was indeed pitiable:

Any other nation under the same pressure would have long ago perished soul and body. But certainly the outward members were becoming gangrened; the powers of renovation seemed for a moment to be beaten by the powers of stagnation, and stagnation is death.¹⁸

And yet, — was it really possible? How indeed had a change so catastrophic really come to pass? Having spiralled up to the peaks of divine endeavour in the Vedic and Upanishadic Ages, and in the Ages of Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa, how had the curve of Indian civilisation been deflected from its high altitudes, how had

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 6.

its movement been strained lower and lower, even to be level with the rugged and forbidding sterility of the "waste land"?

Obviously, then, as already indicated, the change had been brought about in different stages, and as a consequence of the operation of a number of adverse circumstances. There was, firstly, the failure of the fount of vital energy resulting from the studied denial of the ascetic, his systematic refusal to look at the world and its million-petalled munificence of colour and sound and taste and smell, or at the human complex with its imponderables of ardour, agitation, love, hope, struggle, despair and renewal. There was, secondly, a failure of the fount of intellectual energy, "a slumber of the scientific and the critical mind as well as the creative intuition"¹⁹; dialectical reasoning, with its endless propensity for hair-splitting and for the projection of multiple categories and minute differentiations, now acquired an oppressive vogue, and mere sectarianism assumed the garb of omniscience, sat on the high judgement seat, and doled out fitful doses of stale counsel or authoritarian regulation to the mass of the people who looked up for guidance and spiritual food. Above all, spirituality was no more an all-embracing phenomenon, giving strength and significance to every minor and major department of life and conduct, but a vague something whose existence was admitted indeed as a matter of safe policy, but whose influence was reduced to a meagre minimum. Thus, while spirituality remained a formally acknowledged factor in the life of the Hindu, being insulated against effective functioning it could burn "no longer with the large and clear flame of knowledge of

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 24.

former times, but in intense jets and in a dispersed action"; and whatever the splendours of India's past achievement, "at a certain point where progress, adaptation, and a new flowering should have come in, the old civilisation stopped short, partly drew back, partly lost its way".²⁰

These, then, were the causes of the decline and fall — the temporary fall — of India's great civilisation: the will to live was lacking, the intellect had grown moribund, and spirituality would not (or could not) assert itself and revitalise the rest but was unaccountably quiescent or at best was only feebly and haphazardly alive. The impact of the West, and the subsequent national confusions and disasters, quickened the process of decay and disintegration, and the stream of Indian culture and civilisation was in very truth lost — as if for ever — amidst the brambles and quicksands of the eighteenth century. The wheel had turned and turned and brought the season of drought and difficulty, and for the Indian nation the prospect seemed unpromising in the extreme:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.²¹

II

What the British conquest did to India is a large subject, and the whole truth of the matter hasn't been said

²⁰ *ibid*, pp. 24-5.

²¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, II. pp 395-8.

yet. In his Foreword to a formidable tome, *Modern India and the West: A Study of the Interaction of Their Civilisations*, first published in 1941 and reprinted in 1968, Lord Meston remarked that "the metaphor of the impact is inappropriate"; there has been "nothing, or very little, of a clash" between the two cultures! The trauma of conquest by an alien power was nothing. It had all been so gentle, so civilised — like a stream flowing, like a breeze blowing — and it had been entirely to the advantage of India; no violence, no clash at all, just peaceful penetration! The editor of the volume, L.S.S. O'Malley, pointed out that Hindu rulers had charged one-sixth of the produce as tax, Akbar raised it to one-third, and Shah Jehan to one-half. Predatory chieftains — Muslim, Maratha, Jat — had laid the country waste; the great ones ate up the little ones, and the king robbed one and all. It was a dismal tale of poverty, oppression and misery. Having found India in such a condition of chaos and bankruptcy, the British had succeeded — as it were, in spite of the people of India with their abysmal ignorance of the first principles of science, their chronic habit of arranging marriages by comparing horoscopes, and their stupid addiction to superstitions of all sorts — in establishing the rule of law and setting the country on the royal road to progress. Lest one should demur that this is, perhaps, a too partisan view, impartial authority is invoked in the person of one Professor D. A. Buchanan (of U.S.A.) who seems to have said somewhere that "in maintaining peace, unifying the country, developing communications and setting up a standard of integrity and industry", the British Government had "accomplished more than could have been expected of any other government, Indian or foreign,

during this period". A Daniel indeed come to judgement!

On the other hand, books like Dadabhai Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* and Romesh Chunder Dutt's *Economic History of India* have highlighted the evil effects of the British presence in India. It is hardly necessary to labour the point that the loss of political freedom meant, not merely the economic exploitation of the country, but also a warping of the sensibility, a demoralisation of the intellect and the impoverishment of the spirit of the people of India. Writing in 1837, F. J. Shore admitted that India "has been drained of a large proportion of the wealth she once possessed; and her energies have been cramped by a sordid system of misrule to which the interests of millions have been sacrificed for the benefit of the few".²² And, writing next year, Montgomery Martin gave these startling figures:

This annual drain of £3,000,000 on British India amounted in thirty years, at 12 per cent compound interest, to the enormous sum of £723,997,917 sterling; or at a low rate, as £2,000,000 for fifty years, to £8,400,000,000 sterling!²³

The East India Company was always inclined to put the prosperity of India in the future tense, and as for its administration, was it not described by Burke as "one of the most corrupt and obstructive tyrannies that probably ever existed in the world"? Even the explosive events of 1857 and the assumption of direct responsibility by the British Crown hardly effected a sea-change, for in a sermon delivered on 29 March 1874, the Bishop of

²² Quoted in Arabinda Poddar's *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations* (1970), p. 17.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 17.

Manchester felt compelled to make the sad admission:

The question may be asked, "What have we done for India?" India has been the nursery of great soldiers, administrators, financiers, statesmen; yet even to this hour, she has hardly been governed with higher aims than as a field in which cadets of English families may push their fortunes, or as a market in which English merchants may with advantage sell their wares.²⁴

The typical Sahib in India, on his own chosen ground, was a self-confident and self-important figure enough, but neither his writ nor his understanding went very far — hardly a stone's throw beyond (in Kipling's phrase) "the well-ordered road". How much does the yardstick understand the man it seeks to measure? This was also the predicament of the British ruler in India. To *feel* India, says John Masters, "you must become Indian, gain one set of qualities and lose another. As a race we don't do it — we can't".²⁵ To *become* Indian was to be able to understand and serve India; this the British rulers didn't even attempt to do. To help themselves (or Britain), and in the process to injure India, was far easier; and this is what generally happened.

But that too, perhaps, is not the whole truth, for the Western impact was ultimately to prove somewhat of a blessing in disguise. "The English came", says Sisirkumar Mitra, "at a crucial stage of India's evolution to fulfil a Will of the Shakti that guides her destiny".²⁶ It was rather like the darkest hour that precedes the dawn:

For whatever temporary rotting and destruction

²⁴ My attention to this passage was drawn by my son, S. Ambirajan.

²⁵ Quoted in Allen J. Greenberger's *The British Image in India* (1969).

²⁶ *Resurgent India*, p. 35.

this crude impact of European life and culture has caused, it gave three needed impulses. It revived the dormant intellectual and critical impulse; it rehabilitated life and awakened the desire of new creation; it put the reviving Indian spirit face to face with novel conditions and ideals and the urgent necessity of understanding, assimilating and conquering them.²⁷

Naturally enough, new times threw up new men, and the clash between the old and the new led to ready acceptances and affirmations — or violent revulsions and retreats — and, finally, to revisions, readjustments and revaluations. There were sympathetic and understanding scholars like Sir William Jones, Henry Colebrooke and Horace Hayman Wilson who opened the way to Indo-British cultural understanding. The European Christian missionaries, of course, had their own axes to grind, but they too indirectly helped to lift the cultural iron curtain between the rulers and the ruled. But, after all, it is for the nation's own sons and daughters to strive for her redemption — break fresh ground when necessary, to beat back the false, and to assimilate the good.

In the first important phase of India's reaction to the Western impact, there were the stirrings of intellectual activity stimulated by contact with the new rulers, their language and literature, their social and political institutions, their religion, their whole attitude to life. The missionaries had established printing presses in different parts of the country, and books in English and in the languages of India had begun to appear since the beginning of the eighteenth century. *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* (1780) had been followed by other papers, and Indian

²⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 26.

journalism was born. Private English schools were established as early as 1717 at Cuddalore (near Pondicherry), in 1718 at Bombay and in 1720 at Calcutta. The East India Company having assumed, after 1813, educative and cultural (and not alone police) functions, and having shed its commercial monopoly, attempts were made to revive Oriental learning through Government initiative or subsidies. But presently, following current trends and also bowing to the weight of authoritative opinion (Rammohan Roy on the one hand, Macaulay on the other), Lord William Bentinck's Government resolved in 1835 to give official support to "English education alone". This was the real effective beginning of the "new education".

The role of Raja Rammohan Roy in this phase of India's renaissance was most important, and indeed the turning of the tide of India's fortunes after the blight of the eighteenth century may be said to have been marked by his occurrence in Bengal, his advocacy of English education, his fervent plea for urgent social reform (like the abolition of *sati*), his founding of the Brahmo Samaj, and his success in starting a dialogue with the British ruling class — a dialogue conducted with authority and responsibility as well as mutual esteem and regard. Rammohan was truly an Olympian figure, and he inaugurated, in Mahendranath Sircar's words, "a new revival in culture, in social reform and in religious awakening.... He was essentially a builder. He came to fulfil and not to destroy".²⁸ And yet, although he seemed to wander between two worlds (the old Hindu and the new British), his was no split sensibility, he knew where he was going, and where he wanted his

²⁸ *Eastern Lights* (1935), p. 183.

country (and even the world) to go. As Dr. Wingfield-Stratford has put it, Rammohan "was no mere Deist or unbeliever, but a loyal Hindu, a Brahmin of the Brahmins, steeped in the lore of the Upanishads and making his life's work the restoration of the Hindu faith to its pristine simplicity".²⁹ When to the steady inner deterioration caused by the wrangles among selfish ambitious native chieftains and war-lords was added the shock of the Western impact, there followed the collapse of the old order; and the establishment of British rule over the greater part of India occasioned, even if unconsciously, the first rumblings of a social and cultural revolution. But Rammohan's was a move as much from within as from without, and hence his work has been the more enduring. With his vast self-acquired wealth and his varied intellectual interests, he could have lived a life of luxurious ease or scholarly benevolence, but he preferred rather to lead a life of contention and controversy and hectic activity. It is but just appraisal when Nolini Kanta Gupta describes Rammohan as the first

...to draw the country's consciousness from ages past, from the ancient ways, out into the free light and air of the modern day, the first to initiate the country into the new religion of the new age; in him appeared in seed-form the potentialities of all future creation; sparks of his illumined mind entered into every important domain of the collective life of the race — politics, society, religion, education, literature, language — and brought to the country a new birth, a new life, a new creation.³⁰

A Colossus though Rammohan was, he too had his col-

²⁹ *The History of British Civilisation*, p. 964.

³⁰ Quoted in Sisir Kumar Mitra's *Resurgent India*, p. 76.

laborators, and he was blessed in his successors who in their own several ways continued his noble work of galvanising the Hindu fold and the Indian nation. Even a critic of Rammohan like Radhakanta Dev served only to temper the quality of the new thought and the new life it wished to generate. He was shrewd enough to utter the grave warning:

Nothing should be guarded against more carefully than the insensible introduction of a system whereby, with a smattering knowledge of English, youths are weaned from the plough, the axe, and the loom, to render them ambitious only for the clerkship for which hosts would besiege the Government and Mercantile Offices, and the majority being disappointed (as they must be), would (with their little knowledge inspiring pride) be unable to return to their trade, and would necessarily turn vagabonds.³¹

But the new education through the English medium found more supporters than critics, and like heady wine it turned young men's minds and sensibilities. There were the "Derozio Men" — as the students of the Calcutta Hindu College who had studied under Henry Derozio were called — who could salute Kali with "Good morning, madam!", who thought (in Surendranath Banerjea's words) that "everything English was good — even the drinking of brandy was a virtue; everything not English was to be viewed with suspicion". Even so eminently seasoned a scholar like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar — the very opposite of a mere iconoclast — seems to have once remarked:

That the Vedanta and Sankhya are false systems

³¹ Quoted in Arabinda Poddar's *Renaissance in Bengal*, p. 81.

of philosophy is no more a matter of dispute.... While teaching these in the Sanskrit course, we should oppose them by sound philosophy in the English course to counteract their influence.³²

Vidyasagar was a giant among men, and his burning humanism shot out in many directions of religious, educational and social reform. But his formula of enlightenment plus unorthodoxy was not capable of easy realisation, not certainly in mid-nineteenth century. Study in missionary schools often led to conversion, and the taste of English education often led to alienation from traditional backgrounds. Families were divided, homes were divided, for while the elders and the women still swore by traditional values, the young things shouted and acted their defiance of orthodoxy. The converted Christian and the anglicised Indian soon awoke to the realisation that they were neither here nor there, being acceptable neither to orthodox Hindu society nor to the privileged English ruling class. They became very nearly exiles in their own country.

But this was no more than a temporary phase. When the first excitement had passed, there was a healthy interfusion of the new and the old, and the primacy of the West was no more blindly accepted. In the creative work of Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath, in the tremendous visions of Vivekananda, in the spectacular ministry of Dayanand Saraswati, in the seasoned evangelism of Ranade and Telang, the 'new' forged syntheses with the yet living, the perennially enduring past of India. Brahmo Samaj (with its later variations), Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Theosophical Society are among these syntheses, each with its

³² *ibid.*, p. 177.

own secret of power and its own circle of influence. The greatest of these was undoubtedly the stupendous spiritual phenomenon of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, followed by the global ministry of his great disciple, Vivekananda, resulting in a movement with a "wide synthesis of past religious motives and spiritual experience topped by a reaffirmation of the old asceticism and monasticism, but with new living strands in it and combined with a strong humanitarianism and zeal of missionary expansion".³³

There is a third phase too, an attempt at sheer fresh creation, as distinct from even the best reconstruction or the highest synthesis:

The third, only now beginning or recently begun, is rather a process of new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme, recovers its truths, accepts whatever it finds sound or true, useful or inevitable of the modern idea and form, but so transmutes and indianises it, so absorbs and so transforms it entirely into itself that its foreign character disappears and it becomes another harmonious element in the characteristic working of the ancient goddess, the Shakti of India mastering and taking possession of the modern influence, no longer possessed or overcome by it.³⁴

III

India is traditionally the land of Rishis, men cast in heroic or almost superhuman mould, men with some Vision to project, some Word or *mantra* to communicate,

³³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 46.

³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

some new Order to establish. From Vedic times, and through all the ages of our long history, a succession of Rishis have appeared, now here now there, often (or especially) in the very epochs of immitigable darkness or distress; and modern India too has been rich in Rishis who have glimpsed the Vision, uttered the Word, and led the Way. In a speech delivered in 1896, Mahadev Govind Ranade mentioned habitual sincerity of purpose, sustained earnestness of action, originality, imagination, personal magnetism and genius for leadership as the qualities that mark "greatness" in men, and ended by saluting Rammohan Roy as a man who thus fully qualified for greatness. A Rishi, a Mahapurusha, Rammohan was — and Ranade himself has been called a modern Rishi by V. S. Srinivasa Sastri. What an inspiring calendar of modern Rishis: Rammohan, Keshub Chunder Sen, Debendranath Tagore, Vidyasagar, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Narayana Guru, Dayanand, Bankim Chandra, Ranade, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Subramania Bharati, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo: these are among the more well-known names of the last one hundred and fifty years, men of light who had striven to throw back the recurring invasions of darkness. The old Fire that burnt in the Rishis and Prahladas of ancient India survives still, and from time to time it blazes forth in the latter-day Mahapurushas who come with a mission and are enabled to fulfil it in defiance of all adverse forces.

And among the Rishis of our own times, Sri Aurobindo must take the preeminent place. His personality loomed so immense on spiritual India's horizon that he was rather like the great Dayanand whom he once described in these vivid and winged words:

It is as if one were to walk for a long time amid a range of hills rising to a greater or lesser altitude, but all with sweeping contours, green-clad, flattering the eye even in their most bold and striking elevation. But amidst them all, one hill stands apart, piled up in sheer strength, a mass of bare and puissant granite, with verdure on its summit, a solitary pine jutting out into the blue, a great cascade of pure, vigorous and fertilising water gushing out from its strength as a very fountain of life and health to the valley.³⁵

Such was indeed the impression created on our minds by the spiritual phenomenon that was Sri Aurobindo — except that the “sweeping contours” too were not lacking but were harmoniously grafted on the lone, imperious, sky-arching hill.

The representative men of the East and the West have already paid their homage to Rishi Aurobindo. As early as 1907, Rabindranath addressed this poem to Sri Aurobindo, then only thirty-five:

O Aurobindo,

Rabindranath bows to thee!...

When I behold thy face, 'mid bondage, pain and

wrong

And black indignities, I hear the soul's great song

Of rapture unconfined... the spirit of Bharat-land,

O poet, hath placed upon thy face her eyes afire

With love, and struck vast chords upon her vibrant

lyre.³⁶

Twenty-one years later, Rabindranath saw Sri Aurobindo again — but now at Pondicherry in his “cave of Tapa-

³⁵ *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda* (1940), p. 46.

³⁶ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1944, p. 2.

sya"—and recorded the following impression of his visit:

At the very first sight I could realise that he had been seeking for the soul and had gained it, and through this long process of realisation had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration. His face was radiant with an inner light and his serene presence made it evident to me that his soul was not crippled and cramped to the measure of some tyrannical doctrine, which takes delight in inflicting wounds upon life.

I felt that the utterance of the ancient Hindu Rishi spoke from him of that equanimity which gives the human soul its freedom of entrance into the All. I said to him, "You have the Word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world, *Hearken to me!*"...

Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him, "Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath." Today I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence, "Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath!"

After his *darshan* of Sri Aurobindo in April 1950, K. M. Munshi wrote: "A deep light of knowledge and wisdom shone in his eyes.... He was the absolute integration of personality, the Central Idea in Aryan culture materialised in human shape, one of the greatest architects of creative life".³⁷ In his *India on the March*, Romain Rolland described Sri Aurobindo as "the com-

³⁷ Quoted in *Resurgent India*, p. 389.

pletest synthesis that has been realised to this day of the genius of Asia and the genius of Europe... the last of the great Rishis holds in his hand, in firm unrelaxed grip, the bow of creative energy". "I have never known a philosopher", said Frederic Spiegelberg, "so all-embracing in his metaphysical structure as Sri Aurobindo, none before him had the same vision". Of Sri Aurobindo's treatise, *The Life Divine*, Sir Francis Younghusband said that it was "the greatest book which has been produced" in our time; and of Sri Aurobindo's epic, *Savitri*, Sri Krishnaprem said that it is "neither subjective fancy nor yet philosophical thought, but vision and revelation of the actual inner structure of the Cosmos and of the pilgrim of life within its sphere".³⁸ And Dorothy M. Richardson, the English novelist, wrote to me in 1950: "Has there ever existed a more synthetic consciousness than that of Sri Aurobindo? Unifying he is to the limit of the term".

IV

From the birth of Rammohan to the birth of Sri Aurobindo was a whole century's span. When Rammohan was born, it was fifteen years after Plassey and eleven years after the third Battle of Panipat, both decisive events that paved the way for Britain's overlordship of India; also, it was in 1772 that Warren Hastings was appointed Governor of Bengal. The terrible Bengal famine of 1770 had devastated that province, and demoralisation had followed reducing all vestiges of life to a dull stupor:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

³⁸Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual, 1948, p 191.

Across the path of the divine Event
 The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
 In her unlit temple of eternity,
 Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.
 Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
 In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
 The abysm of the unbodied Infinite;
 A fathomless zero occupied the world.³⁹

This magnificent exordium with which Sri Aurobindo begins his description of the 'Symbol Dawn' vividly brings out — as if by sleight of poetic connotation — the dense apathy, the vast misery, the sheer inconscience that seemed to have generally overtaken the country as a result of centuries' misrule, Asuric in-fighting and the overwhelming invasion of *tamas*. In the hinterland of the unconscious, slumbering men dully remembered things long past, the faded glories, the grandeur gathered up in oblivion, the great men of the past who had become mere names, the great deeds that had since been completely undone. Memory, dream, nightmare busied themselves

Repeating for ever the unconscious act,
 Prolonging for ever the unseeing will,
 Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force
 Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns
 And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl...
 Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs
 Forgetful of her spirit and her fate.

But that emptiness, stillness, stupor, death-stance and total darkness couldn't last for ever. At long last there were the first obscure rumblings of returning life, reviving sensibility and awakening mind:

³⁹ *Savitri* (1954), p. 1.

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;
A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
Something that wished but knew not how to be,
Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance.

When Rammohan was born in 1772, it was as though
An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast.
Insensibly somewhere a breach began:
A long lone line of hesitating hue
Like a vague smile tempting a desert heart
Troubled the far rim of life's obscure sleep.

After the long dreary hours of the night, the breach into
darkness had somehow to be made, and the first streamers
of the Dawn had to be coaxed into movement, the
first seeds of new life had to be sowed in the desert
heart. Then, in a brief blinding jet of pure flame, the
Sun spirited out its native glow; it was — in India's national
context — the occurrence of Dayanand in 1824:

Arrived from the other side of boundlessness
An eye of deity pierced through the dumb deeps;
A scout in a reconnaissance from the sun...
Intervening in a mindless universe,
Its message crept through the reluctant hush
Calling the adventure of consciousness and joy...

Not long afterwards, in 1836, a still greater wonder was
witnessed when Ramakrishna was born, who as the
Paramahansa was to incarnate God on earth at Dakshin-
eshwar:

All can be done if the God-touch is there...
Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture's dim appeal.
The persistent thrill of a transfiguring touch

Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.

Bankim Chandra, who was born two years after Ramakrishna, inaugurated the literary renaissance and gave India the reviving mantra, *Bande Mataram*; and twenty years after Ramakrishna (who was to restore spiritual sovereignty to India), there was born in 1856, in Maharashtra, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the Lokamanya who was destined to galvanise political activity and to teach his countrymen the other reverberating mantra, *Swaraj is my birthright*. In education, in literary activity, in spiritual, social and political action — in all fields of national life, in fact — there were visible the sure signs of an awakening into a “new life”. Then came the climactic moment, the birth of Sri Aurobindo on 15 August 1872:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god.
Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.

That would be one way of reading the history of the Indian renaissance from 1772 to 1872, from Rammohan to Sri Aurobindo, from the Forerunner to the Redeemer. Not only was Sri Aurobindo “the greatest living philosopher on earth” (as Spiegelberg called him in 1949); not only has Sri Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine* been described by S. K. Maitra as the last arch in “the bridge of thoughts and sighs which spans the history of Aryan culture”; not only is Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* “probably the greatest epic in the English language” (as Raymond F. Piper has described it); Sri Aurobindo was also the

perfidious prophet of Indian nationalism, and a great patriot, a great thinker, and a great Yogi, a versatile poet and dramatist in English and a supreme master of English prose with a 'global' style uniquely his own. His many-faceted personality, as it casts its lambent flame on his poems and his letters and his luminous essays and his massive treatises, attracts us and fascinates us, and at times even awes us. As for the power of his Personality, the multiple consciousness that inhabited him and lighted up his Presence, how shall we seek its measure, how may we hope to contain it in a biography? But that Power was also Love, and we may therefore trustingly venture to draw near to him, read falteringly significant pages from the Book of his immaculate Life, and try to follow diligently and reverently the evolution and consummation of his Personality.

V

The biographer's task, however, is by no means easy. Sri Aurobindo himself once wrote to his disciple, Dilip Kumar Roy: "Neither you nor anyone else knows anything at all of my life; it has not been on the surface for men to see". Again, in the course of a conversation, Sri Aurobindo is reported to have said: "To write my biography is impossible... Not only in my case but in that of poets, philosophers and Yogis, it is no use attempting a biography, because they do not live in their external life.... It is different with men of action like Napoleon or Julius Caesar".⁴⁰ What do we know of Valmiki, for instance? Only this — and what more do

⁴⁰ A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo* (Second Edition, 1960), p. 235.

we want? — that he was the kind of man (or superman) who could have written (because he did in fact write) the immortal *Ramayana*. Likewise, Sri Aurobindo was the kind of man (or superman) who was able to live the kind of life he actually lived, who was able to snap the panorama of the Spirit's landscape in works like *The Life Divine* and *Savitri*, who was able to invade and conquer and bring down the Invisible, who was able to live in the Light of Truth and catch its rays in his many beautiful poems and his innumerable letters and his great prose treatises. As Sri Aurobindo himself once wrote:

...what matters in a spiritual man's life is not what he did or what he was outside to the view of the men of his time (that is what historicity or biography comes to: does it not?) but what he was and within; it is only that that gives any value to his outer life at all. It is the inner life that gives to the outer any power it may have, and the inner life of a Spiritual man is something vast and full and, at least in the great figures, so crowded and teeming with significant things that no biographer or historian could ever hope to seize it all and tell it".⁴¹

Few amongst those of the younger generation have had the liberating experience of seeing him in person. They can but gaze at the published photographs (much as they look at the supposed portraits of Homer or of Sophocles or of Shakespeare), and make whatever conjectures or conclusions may seem valid or appropriate.

There were, however, those who knew Sri Aurobindo in person, as pupils or as friends or as collaborators; and there were those who were privileged to have his

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. vi.

darshan off and on in his Yogashram at Pondicherry, and they were vouchsafed on those rare occasions a vision of the Purusha in all his god's grandeur of suffused spirituality, and they did see then something of the unique Person, felt the steady light of his Power, and received the purifying vibrations from his Personality; and certainly, their testimony is most valuable. Reference has been made already to Rabindranath's and K. M. Munshi's reactions, but those were by no means exceptional. When Ambalal Purani met Sri Aurobindo in 1918, there was "a spiritual light surrounding his face. His look was penetrating".⁴² Having met Sri Aurobindo in 1924, Dilip Kumar Roy made this record of his impressions in *Among the Great*:

"A radiant personality!" — sang the air itself about him. A deep aura of peace ringed him round, an ineffable yet concrete peace which drew you into its orbit. But it was the eyes which fascinated me most — shining like two beacons in life's grey waste of waters. His torso was bare except for a scarf thrown across... he smiled gently, his deep glance spraying peace upon me somehow, giving me a feeling of his compassion... not a mere human compassion but something far greater!

The young neophyte was deeply stirred, he had indeed found his guru — the guru of gurus — at last. And the poet, Amal Kiran (K. D. Sethna), could merely say:

All heaven's secrecy lit to one face
Crowning with calm the body's blinded cry —
A soul of upright splendour like the moon!⁴³

The many things that, in a strictly material or "factual"

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 300.

⁴³ *Poems on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother* (1954), p. 3.

sense, have happened to Sri Aurobindo are certainly *not* his life, his quintessential life, — yet they may serve to sketch the varied backgrounds in which the life was lived. If we cannot see the secret processes of Sri Aurobindo's life, if we cannot infer the harmony underlying and triumphing over — including and exceeding — the apparent fluctuations in his outer life, if we may not follow the wide-ranging movements of his thought, the steep climb of his consciousness or his heady descent into the dark waters of Inconscience, we may at least mark the stages in the visible part of the journey of his life, we may at least record some of the so-called "facts and dates" of his terrestrial life!

And yet, — if one may boldly pose the question! — isn't reading and getting into the "inwardness" of *The Life Divine* or *Savitri*, isn't that too a way of reading Sri Aurobindo's life? "*The Life Divine* is not philosophy but fact", Sri Aurobindo once said; "it contains what I have realised and seen".⁴⁴ And as for *Savitri*, what is it except the poetic recordation of Sri Aurobindo's own experiences? As the Mother has said in the course of a conversation with a sadhak, the realities and cosmic truths projected in *Savitri* were those actually experienced by Sri Aurobindo "as one experiences joys or sorrows physically"; and further:

He walked in the darkness of inconscience, even in the neighbourhood of death, endured the sufferings of perdition and emerged from the mud, the earth's misery, to breathe the sovereign plenitude and enter the supreme Ananda.... He accepted suf-

⁴⁴ *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, recorded by A. B. Purani, First Series (1959), p. 274.

fering to transform suffering into the joy of union with the Supreme.

Teaching, poetry, politics, philosophy, Yoga — all were part of Sri Aurobindo's sadhana of self-transformation and world-transformation, and an integral study, as the present one aspires to be, may at least hope to get reasonably close to the Aurobindo Saga. There can be no failure since the assurance has already been given:

The Spirit shall look out through Matter's gaze
And Matter shall reveal the Spirit's face.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Savitri*, p. 796.

PART I

HUMANIST AND POET

.

CHAPTER TWO

CHILDHOOD, BOYHOOD AND YOUTH

I¹

The district of Hoogly in West Bengal — the district that has given to Bengal and to India two such world-famous figures as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ramakrishna Paramahansa — can almost be called the cradle of the Bengali or even of the Indian renaissance. Konnagar is a thickly populated area, almost a small town, in the Hoogly district; situated on the west bank of the river Hoogly (otherwise known as the Bhagirathi), it is about eleven miles to the north of Calcutta. Konnagar is apparently a place of considerable antiquity, for it is mentioned in old Bengali literature. The Mitras and the Ghoses of Konnagar have carved out creditable names for themselves in the political and cultural history of Bengal. Among the many outstanding men who have sprung up from the fertile cultural soil of Konnagar, special mention may be made of Sib Chandra Deb, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement and one of the great philanthropists of Bengal and, besides, one whose munificence gave Konnagar most of its public institutions; Dr. Trailokyanath Mitra and Raja Digambar Mitra, once well-known figures in Bengal's political life; Raja Dr. Rajendralal Mitra, the famous antiquarian and author of *The Aryan Vernaculars of India*; and Mahamahopadhyaya Dinabandhu Nyayaratna, the eminent Sanskrit scholar.

The Ghoses of Konnagar were a no less distinguished

¹ I am indebted to Sri Sisirkumar Mitra of Sri Aurobindo Ashram for much of the information contained in this section.

family than the Mitras. Perhaps all the Ghoses "came originally from the Punjab on the Afghan border. The word means 'fame' and they were a tribe of the proud warrior caste".² Krishnadhan Ghose was born in this family about the year 1845, his parents being Kaliprasad Ghose and Kailasabasini Devi, a lady known for her remarkable beauty, her feeling for religion and her exceptional piety. In Krishnadhan's time the family was not in affluent circumstances, and "the family house or palace, a very noble building", was not far from Calcutta but "quite in ruins". Nevertheless Krishnadhan, although "living almost entirely by charity of friends", by his "superhuman perseverance" had a meritorious school and college career.³ He passed the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University from the local school in 1858 and then proceeded to the Calcutta Medical College. When he was in his fourth year at the Medical College, he married Swarnalata Devi, aged twelve and the eldest daughter of Rishi Rajnarain Bose, according to the rites of Adi Brahma Samaj. It was the alliance of two authentic and forceful currents in the inner life of Bengal. A contemporary of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a student of Henry Derozio and David Hare, Rajnarain Bose was an early synthesis of the East and the West, and in the heyday of his hallowed life "represented the high water-mark of the composite culture of the country — Vedantic, Islamic and European".⁴ He has been called "the militant defender of his country, the Olympian champion of truth, the

² Manomohan Ghose in a letter to Laurence Binyon (quoted in A. B. Purani's *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, Second Edition (1960), p. 13).

³ *ibid.*

⁴ The quotation is taken from an article on the life of Sri Aurobindo in *Swaraj*, republished in the *Karmayogin*, from the seventh issue onwards.

ruthless antagonist to sham"⁵; he was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj in its palmyest days, and Debendranath Tagore said of his books: "Whatever falls from the lips of Rajnarain Babu creates a great sensation in the country"; undoubtedly one of the makers of modern Bengal, he is not inaptly described as the "grandfather of Indian nationalism".⁶ At the same time, the fire of spirituality burned steadily within him, and his ardent love for India, his capacity to translate into action the motions of his thought and his sturdy sense of direction into the future were revealed in many creative expressions of friendship, adoration and benevolence. On the occasion of his death in 1899, his grandson, Sri Aurobindo, wrote a touching sonnet entitled *Transiit, Non Periiit*:

Not in annihilation lost, nor given
To darkness art thou fled from us and light,
O strong and sentient spirit; no mere heaven
Of ancient joys, no silence eremite
Received thee; but the omnipresent Thought
Of which thou wast a part and earthly hour,
Took back its gift. Into that splendour caught
Thou hast not lost thy special brightness. Power
Remains with thee and the old genial force
Unseen for blinding light, not darkly lurks...⁷

When Krishnadhan Ghose left Calcutta for Great Britain in 1869 to undergo a course of advanced medical studies, it was his father-in-law's earnest wish that the young sojourner in the West would not allow himself to be too easily dazzled and denationalised by the civi-

⁵ 'Rishi Rajnarain Bose' by Chinmoy (*Mother India*, December 1961).

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 34.

lisation of the Occident.⁸ Nevertheless, when Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose returned to India in 1871 with a further degree in Medicine from Aberdeen University, full of honours and bristling with plans for the future, he was a confirmed believer in Western civilisation and wished that India could transform herself, overnight if possible, into another self-confident and puissant and purposeful Britain. But although he was, as a result of his stay in Britain, an agnostic in religion ("My father was a tremendous atheist", Sri Aurobindo is reported to have said once)⁹, this only gave a new edge to his humanism, and he decided to dedicate himself to the unstinted service of the people. He had a noble and lovable countenance too, and on one occasion a Christian missionary spoke to Rajnarain about his son-in-law: "I have never seen such a sweet face as his!" With his specialist training and his unwearying commitment to the cause of public health, Dr. Krishnadhan came soon to be acclaimed as one of the most successful civil surgeons of his day.

On his return from Britain, the orthodox sections in Konnagar wanted Krishnadhan — as was the custom in those days and till recently — to go through the ceremony of *prāyaścitta* or purification for having crossed the black waters and sojourned in an alien land. Dr. Krishnadhan, however, refused to make this concession to superstitious custom and preferred rather to leave Konnagar for good. He sold away — "for a song" as it

⁸ At one stage of his life, Rajnarain seems to have "remorsefully declared that it would have been much better if they had not at all learnt English" (Arabinda Poddar, *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations*, p. 40).

⁹ Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 7.

were — his ancestral house and property to a local Brahmin, turning down a more tempting offer from a relation; the word had been given, and Krishnadhan wouldn't go back on it! Having thus left the place of his birth, Krishnadhan moved from district to district as the Government Civil Surgeon, endearing himself to the people everywhere by his innumerable acts of charity and benevolence. In Bhagalpur, Rungpur and Khulna — especially in the last place — Dr. Krishnadhan's name became almost a household word. "Wherever he served", writes Purani, "he was very popular and highly respected by all. He used to take a very prominent part in civic life, and interested himself in schools, hospitals, municipalities and other public bodies. The people of Khulna afterwards started a school in his name and his photograph was placed in the town hall. It is said that he changed the whole face of the town of Khulna".¹⁰ Krishnadhan's generous and uncalculating nature seems to have made him give away without let or hindrance, and individuals and institutions alike benefited by their fruitful association with him. "Keen of intellect, tender of heart, impulsive and generous almost to recklessness, regardless of his own wants but sensitive to the sufferings of others — this was the inventory of the character of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose".¹¹

Not only was Dr. Krishnadhan a capable Civil Surgeon and a true friend of the people, but he was also agreeably and alertly responsive to the social and literary cross-currents of his day. He took keen interest in the general welfare of the people around him and he evinced — despite the fact that he was "essentially a product of

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹ *The Karmayogin*, No. 7.

English education and European culture”¹² — a genuine enthusiasm for the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Being a *persona grata* with European as well as Bengalee society, Dr. Krishnadhan was able to act as a link, a bridge, between the two; and, indeed, he came to be called the “Suez Canal”, for his house served as a common meeting place, day after day, for both Europeans and Bengalees. During the greater part of his active life, Dr. Krishnadhan was also blessed with the companionship of his charming wife, Swarnalata Devi, who was in fact known as the “Rose of Rungpur” during their stay in that district town. It was only in the latter part of her life that she fell a victim to an unfortunate malady that clouded the last years of Dr. Krishnadhan’s life.

II

Sri Aurobindo was born at about 5 a.m., an hour before sunrise, at the house of Dr. Krishnadhan’s friend, Barrister Manomohan Ghose in Theatre Road,¹³ Calcutta, on 15 August 1872. Benoy Bhushan and Manomohan had preceded Sri Aurobindo, who was thus the third son of Dr. Krishnadhan and Swarnalata Devi. The time of unfolding dawn, an hour before sunrise:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

Across the path of the divine Event

The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone

In her unlit temple of eternity,

Lay stretched....

¹² *ibid.*, No. 7.

¹³ At that time it was really that part of Lower Circular Road that was on the 24 Parganas side (Purani, *Life*, pp. 328-9).

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god.

Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.¹⁴

As Dr. Kalidas Nag aptly remarks, "Sri Aurobindo... was born in 1872 to celebrate, as it were, the centenary of the birth of Rammohan Roy". At the christening ceremony, Dr. Krishnadhan gave the name 'Aravinda Ackroyd Ghose' to the child. A Miss Annette Ackroyd was present at the ceremony, and Krishnadhan, with his penchant for things English, probably added the name to 'Aravinda'.¹⁵

True to his own deep convictions and in conformity with the practice of many other educated Indians of his time who had all too easily capitulated to the glamour of English ways and English speech, Dr. Krishnadhan too decided to give his children an entirely European type of education and upbringing. The children had an English nurse, Miss Pagett, and easily picked up English, but couldn't speak Bengali; from the butler, however, they learnt some broken Hindustani as well. Although we know very little of Sri Aurobindo's childhood days, one interesting incident may be recorded. Once, when his eldest maternal uncle, Jogendra, held up a mirror before Sri Aurobindo and said, "See, there is a monkey!", the boy seems to have shown the mirror back to Jogendra and added: "Great uncle, great monkey! *Bado māmā bado bānar!*"¹⁶

In 1877, when Sri Aurobindo was five years old, he was

¹⁴ *Savitri* (1954), pp. 3, 6.

¹⁵ *Purani, Life*, p. II.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 5.

sent — along with his elder brothers — to the Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling, run by Irish nuns. About his school life, again, little is known, but he seems to have made a profound impression on his teachers at Darjeeling by his sparkling and wide-awake intelligence and the singular sweetness of his nature. The companions of the Ghose brothers in the school and in the boarding-house were mostly English children and, of course, English was the sole medium of instruction in school and the channel of communication outside. A sort of exile in his own country, Sri Aurobindo thus started lisping in English at the age of five: "In the shadow of the Himalayas, in the sight of the wonderful snow-capped peaks, even in their native land they were brought up in alien surroundings".¹⁷ In later years, Sri Aurobindo recapitulated a dream of his Darjeeling days:

I was lying down one day when I saw suddenly a great darkness rushing into me and enveloping me and the whole universe. After that I had a great *tamas* always hanging on to me all through my stay in England. I believe that darkness had something to do with the *tamas* that came upon me. It left me only when I was coming back to India.¹⁸

The impressionable Darjeeling period must nevertheless have opened the boy's psyche to the beauty and splendour of Himalayan scenery, for a passage like the following from one of his poems seems to be born of intense personal experience:

He journeyed to the cold north and the hills
Austere...
...to a silent place he came

¹⁷ Lotika Basu, *Indian Writers of English Verse* (1933), p. 101.

¹⁸ Purani, *Life*, pp. 6-7.

Within a heaped enormous region piled
 With prone far-drifting hills, huge peaks overwhelmed
 Under the vast illimitable snows, —
 Snow on ravine, and snow on cliff, and snow
 Sweeping in strenuous outlines to heaven,
 With distant gleaming vales and turbulent rocks,
 Giant precipices black-hewn and bold
 Daring the universal whiteness; last,
 A mystic gorge into some secret world.
 He in that region waste and wonderful
 Sojourned, and morning-star and evening-star
 Shone over him and faded, and immense
 Darkness wrapped the hushed mountain solitudes
 And moonlight's brilliant muse and the cold stars
 And day upon the summits brightening.¹⁹

Is it Pururavas or Sri Aurobindo that thus stands charmed and enraptured, gazing at the "immortal summits"? Probably, it is both!

III

In 1879, Dr. Krishnadhan and his wife took Sri Aurobindo and his brothers, Benoy Bhushan and Manomohan, and their sister, Sarojini, to England. The boys were entrusted to an English family, the Rev. William Drewett, a congregational minister, and Mrs. Drewett, who lived at 84, Shakespeare Street, Manchester. Mr. Drewett was a cousin of a magistrate at Rungpur, Mr. Glazier, with whom Dr. Krishnadhan was on friendly terms. He left strict instructions with the Drewetts that the boys "should not be allowed to make the acquaintance of any Indian

¹⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. 1, pp. 54-5.

or undergo any Indian influence".²⁰ It was expected that under the fostering care of the Drewetts the children would grow up into typical products of Western culture, uncontaminated by Oriental ways and ideas and in total ignorance of India, her people, her religion, her languages and her culture. It was during this visit that Swarnalata Devi gave birth to another son, Barindra Kumar; but in the birth register, his name was given as "Emmanuel Ghose", another instance of Dr. Krishnadhan's predilection for European names!

While Sri Aurobindo's two elder brothers were sent to the Manchester Grammar School, Sri Aurobindo himself — he was only seven — was educated privately by the Drewetts. Himself an accomplished scholar, Mr. Drewett gave Sri Aurobindo a good grounding in Latin and made him proficient in English, besides teaching him history, geography, arithmetic and French. Sri Aurobindo found time at home to read on his own Keats and Shelley, Shakespeare and the Bible, and he even wrote some verse for the Fox Family Magazine. While games did not appeal to him, he seems to have played cricket in Mr. Drewett's garden, though not at all well.

An interesting incident of the Manchester period is worth recording. Once when a meeting of non-conformist ministers was being held at Cumberland, old Mrs. Drewett (Mr. Drewett's mother) took Sri Aurobindo there. To continue in Sri Aurobindo's own words, —

After the prayers were over all nearly dispersed, but devout people remained a little longer and it was at this time that conversions were made. I was feeling completely bored. Then a minister approached me and asked me some questions. I did not

²⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother* (1953), p. 9.

give any reply. Then they all shouted, 'He is saved, he is saved', and began to pray for me and offer thanks to God. I did not know what it was all about. Then the minister came to me and asked me to pray.... I did it in the manner in which children recite their prayers before going to sleep to keep up appearances.... I was about ten at the time.²¹

It was partly because of this incident and partly also because of his apparently Christianised name 'Aravinda Ackroyd Ghose' that there was once current the unfounded rumour that Sri Aurobindo had been converted to Christianity.

Three or four years after Sri Aurobindo and his brothers had taken residence with the Drewetts, on account of differences with the deacons Mr. Drewett resigned the pastorage of the Stockport Road Congregation Church and emigrated to Australia with his wife, leaving the three boys in charge of his mother. Presently old Mrs Drewett took lodgings for the Ghose brothers in London at 49, St. Stephen's Avenue, Uxbridge Road, Shepherd's Bush. Sri Aurobindo was admitted to St. Paul's School in September 1884 and remained there till December 1889. At the time of admission, the Head Master, Dr Walker, was impressed by Sri Aurobindo's character and abilities, and especially his knowledge of Latin, and took him up to ground him in Greek and then pushed him rapidly into the higher classes of the school. At first Mrs. Drewett, who had taken lodgings for them, was with the boys in London, for St. Paul's was but a day school. At the St. Stephen's Avenue house, the old lady, who was a pious Christian, used to have passages from the

²¹ Purani, *Life*, p. 9.

Bible read at prayer time. The boys were expected to participate in all this, and Benoy Bhushan often conducted the worship. On one occasion, however, Manomohan was in a puckish mood and said that old Moses got only his deserts when his people disobeyed him! Mrs. Drewett was understandably furious and declared she would not live with an atheist, since the whole house might fall down! After she had left, Benoy Bhushan and Sri Aurobindo moved to 128, Cromwell Road, and Manomohan went into lodgings. From September 1887 to April 1889, Sri Aurobindo was at this Cromwell Road residence, and then went to stay at 28, Kempsford Gardens, Earl's Court, South Kensington, and remained there till almost the end of the year.²²

Sri Aurobindo's five years at St. Paul's were a period when — albeit desultorily — he garnered extensively from classical and modern European literature. Strictly in academic terms, his school record speaks for itself. He won the Butterworth 2nd Prize in 1889 for proficiency in Literature, and the Bedford Prize for proficiency in History. Twice in November 1889, he participated in debates, once on 'The Inconsistency of Swift's Political Views' and on the second occasion on 'Milton'.²³ When he had caught up with Greek during the first two years, Sri Aurobindo was able to take his regular studies easy in the last three years and devote his spare time to general reading, especially English and French literature, some Italian, German and Spanish, and the history of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe.

The period of about two years between old Mrs. Drewett's going away and Sri Aurobindo's winning a classi-

²² *ibid.*, p. 17, also, *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 11.

²³ *Purani, Life*, p. 12.

cal scholarship of the value of £80 per year tenable at King's College, Cambridge, was a time of "the greatest suffering and poverty";²⁴ and for a whole year at least, he had to subsist on a slice or two of sandwich, bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning, and some pastry or saveloy sandwiches and a cup of tea in the afternoon — generally skipping lunch and dinner. Remittances from Dr. Krishnadhan had become more and more irregular and inadequate, and the boys were thus increasingly left to their own resources. Benoy Bhushan, the eldest, became an assistant on five shillings a week to James S. Cotton, who was Secretary to the South Kensington Liberal Club. Manomohan went up to Christ Church, Oxford, and was thriving as a scholar and as a poet. But financial worries were not soon to leave any of them. The Cromwell Road residence had no proper bedrooms at all, nor any heating arrangements; there was a railway behind, and trains passed to and fro with some frequency. But since the rooms were in the building that housed the office of the South Kensington Liberal Club, the boys had the use of its good reading-room. Life was trying on the whole, and Sri Aurobindo hadn't even an overcoat to face the rigours of winter in London.

But there were other compensations. Reading poetry, and even writing poetry; and going out of London during the vacations. One of his boyhood enthusiasms seems to have been Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*. He read it often "without understanding everything"; and perhaps it struck a chord within, and he had a thought that he too would dedicate his life to a similar world change

²⁴ Sri Aurobindo on Himself, pp 11-2.

and take part in it.²⁵ During his last years at St. Paul's, Sri Aurobindo began writing poetry in earnest. There was the catalytic effect of Manomohan's association on his younger brother, and there was Manomohan's friend and class-mate, Laurence Binyon. Manomohan, Binyon, Stephen Phillips and Arthur Cripps were to collaborate on *Primavera*, a collection of poems, that came out in 1890. Having first experimented on Greek and Latin verses, Sri Aurobindo turned a passage from the Greek into English verse when he was seventeen. This piece, 'Hecuba', was liked by Binyon who suggested that Sri Aurobindo should write more poetry. Thus was he properly launched on his career as a poet.²⁶

From some of Manomohan's letters of this period that have fortunately survived, it is possible to have some glimpses of vacationing by the brothers, — more often by Manomohan and Sri Aurobindo alone. One or two extracts from the letters may be given here:

We have been having very rainy and unsettled weather of late — that is the worst of the Lake District — when the weather once becomes unsettled, there is no telling when it will be fine again... a little while ago, I and my younger brother went together to Thirlmere, with Helvellyn looming up on one side all the way, but we did not see the lake which is a very pretty one — for, being a bleak, misty day, it came on to rain when we were a mile from it and we had to turn back.... (Letter dated 13 August 1886).

On Friday we went all three of us with a gentleman to Thirlmere... a lovely lake, and wonderfully

²⁵ Purani, *Life*, p. 19.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 20.

placid and calm.... We crossed the lake in the middle by the bridges, and came back by the beautiful vale of St. John and a path round Nathdale Fells, getting home at 6 p.m. and eating a tremendous tea (the four of us getting through two considerable loaves).

On Saturday we went to Watendlath which is certainly the loveliest place I have yet seen in the Lake District.... My younger brother, myself, and the same gentleman walked along Lake Derwentwater and then up the Borrow woods, a steep hill climb into Watendlath.... (Letter dated 23 August 1886).

We came here (Hastings) last Tuesday... it is delightful on this cliff especially where we are staying. But I confess the sea is better than the land.... (Letter dated 8 August 1887).²⁷

It may be inferred from another letter of Mamomohan's that Sri Aurobindo spent his 1888 vacation at Galway on the invitation of a friend he had met at the Club.²⁸

During his last two years at St. Paul's, besides successfully competing for a Senior Classical Scholarship of £80 per year, Sri Aurobindo also registered as a candidate for the Indian Civil Service examination, relying mainly on his proficiency in the classics. He couldn't afford — and he didn't need — any coach, but he passed the examination in July 1890, securing the eleventh place, and scoring record marks in Greek and Latin. Added to the Senior Scholarship tenable at King's College, Cambridge, the I.C.S. stipend for the probationary period placed Sri Aurobindo in a much better position financially than during the two immediately preceding years of privation

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp 21ff ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 24.

and poverty. After his success at the I.C.S., Sri Aurobindo could have (if he had so wished) stopped or at least taken easy his further studies in the classics at King's, but that was not his way — and, besides, he couldn't afford to give up the scholarship. He was still hard-pressed for money because, besides supporting himself, he had also occasionally to help his brothers. It was a double strain all the same, this work as a classical scholar and his work as I. C. S. probationer, but Sri Aurobindo did brilliantly and in 1892 passed the First Part of the Classical Tripos examination in the first class even at the end of the second year of his residence in Cambridge. He also won the Rawley Prize for Greek Iambics, and other prizes, in King's College. Writing of him to James Cotton, Sri Aurobindo's senior tutor G. M. Prothero said:

His (Sri Aurobindo's) pecuniary circumstances prevented him from resigning his scholarship (classical) when he became a selected candidate (for the I.C.S).... He performed his part of the bargain, as regards the College, most honourably.... That a man should have been able to do this (which alone is quite enough for most undergraduates) and at the same time to keep up his I.C.S. work proves very unusual industry and capacity. Besides his classical scholarship, he possessed a knowledge of English literature far beyond the average of undergraduates, and wrote much better English than most young Englishmen.... Moreover, the man has not only ability but character. He has had a very hard and anxious time of it for the last two years... yet his courage and perseverance have never failed. I have several times written to his father on his behalf, but

for the most part unsuccessfully. It is only lately that I managed to extract from him enough to pay some tradesmen who would otherwise have put his son into the County Court. I am quite sure that these pecuniary difficulties were not due to any extravagances on Ghose's part....²⁹

When sending the money at last, Dr. Krishnadhan seems to have reprimanded Sri Aurobindo for his "extravagance"; but as Sri Aurobindo used to say later on, "There was not money enough to be extravagant with!"³⁰

To the testimony of G. M. Prothero may be added that of Oscar Browning, who told Sri Aurobindo (as reported by him in the course of a letter to his father):

Last night I was invited to coffee with one of the dons and in his room I met the great O.B., otherwise Oscar Browning, who is the feature par excellence of King's. He was extremely flattering and passing from the subject of Cotillons to that of scholarship, he said to me:

"I suppose you know you passed an extraordinarily high examination. I have examined papers at thirteen examinations and I have never during that time seen such excellent papers as yours.... As for your essay, it was wonderful".

In this essay (a comparison between Shakespeare and Milton), I indulged my oriental tastes to the top of their bent, it overflowed with rich and tropical imagery, it abounded in antitheses and epigrams and it expressed my real feelings without restraint or reservation. I thought myself that it was the best thing I have ever done....

When Sri Aurobindo had answered when asked about his

²⁹ *ibid*, pp. 15-6 and p. 25 ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 26.

rooms, Oscar Browning exclaimed "That wretched hole!" and, turning to Mahaffy, added: "How rude we are to our scholars! We get great minds to come down here and then shut them up in that box. I suppose it is to keep their pride down!"³¹ In his well-documented *Life of Sri Aurobindo*, Purani has also given extracts from letters to him written by two of Sri Aurobindo's contemporaries at Cambridge. One of them refers to Sri Aurobindo as "a brilliant young classical scholar... of marked literary and poetic taste, and as far as I ever saw a young man of high character and modest bearing, who was liked by all who knew him". The other letter refers to Sri Aurobindo's complete lack of interest in sports while at Cambridge and to his general attitude towards England:

His interests were in literature: among Greek poets, for instance, he once waxed enthusiastic over Sappho, and he had a nice feeling for English style. Yet for England itself he seemed to have small affection; it was not only the climate that he found trying: as an example he became quite indignant when, on one occasion, I called England the modern Athens. This title, he declared, belonged to France: England much more resembled Corinth, a commercial state, and therefore unattractive to him.³²

Aside from his disinclination for sports and his commitment to literary studies and the writing of poetry, there was something else too that marked his last years in England: his growing interest in Indian politics. His father used to send the *Bengalee*, with passages marked relating to cases of British misgovernment. Even at the age of eleven, Sri Aurobindo had a vague feeling that he might one day be called upon to play a role in the

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 26-7. ³² *ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

coming revolutionary upsurge in India and the world. Some time after he came to Cambridge, he joined a secret society romantically called the "Lotus and Dagger", each member taking a vow to work for the liberation of India generally and also to take up one particular line of work in furtherance of that aim. While at Cambridge, Sri Aurobindo also participated in the meetings of the Indian Majlis, acted as their secretary for a time, and made many speeches breathing a revolutionary spirit. These facts must certainly have come to the notice of the authorities in England. The "Lotus and Dagger" was practically still-born, but that was nevertheless the first time Indian students in England had come together with a purpose that beyonded the mendicancy and moderatism of the accredited political leaders in India. Again, through his participation in the debates of the Indian Majlis, Sri Aurobindo had been able to throw out the first suggestive hints of the idea of revolution that was already slowly unfolding within his political consciousness.

IV

Although Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose was unable to keep his sons in England above want, he had a high opinion of their abilities and had great expectations about their future. In the earlier years, he used to send £360 per year for their maintenance, but latterly he had become very careless and even improvident. His wife was afflicted with insanity and he had taken to drinking. The boys were separated from their parents, and they knew besides about the mother's malady and the father's suf-

ferings A letter of February 1888 from Manomohan to Laurence Binyon almost uncovers the whole horror and pity of the predicament of the Ghose brothers during their stay in England:

This human cry (of expansive childhood and boyhood) stretches passionately forward its young tendrils and the warm feelings are at the forefront yearning to bestow and to be reciprocated; it is all heart, its brain lies undeveloped. It is the wise forethought of nature that this should be so, but in my case Fate came between and cancelled her decrees, and what to others is the bright portion of their life, its heaven and refuge, was for me bitterly and hopelessly blighted.... My mother is insane.... Crying for bread I was given a stone. My father was kind but stern, and I never saw much of him.³³

To some extent, such must have been the feelings of Benoy Bhushan and Sri Aurobindo also. On the other hand, they couldn't really come to the point of blaming their father; rather would they speak of him with undisguised admiration and pride. Manomohan himself had written earlier to Binyon:

My father's character may well be called 'thorough'. He is determined to give them (his children) a good education, though he is toiling under difficulties. He must be a man of iron nerves.... Indeed he says, "my body is as stern as my mind to have survived all the trouble which I have endured". I cannot but be proud with admiration at the sight of such dauntless self-sacrifice and heroic perseverance.³⁴

³³ *ibid.*, p. 30. ³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

Sri Aurobindo was no less effusive in praise of his father, and said almost fifty years after his death: "He was extremely generous. Hardly anybody who went to him for something came back empty-handed".³⁵ On his part, Dr. Krishnadhan was also uncommonly proud of his sons, as may be seen from this letter that he wrote, shortly before his death, to his brother-in-law Jogendra Bose:

The three sons I have produced, I have made giants of them. I may not, but you will live to be proud of the three nephews who will adorn your country and shed lustre on your name.... Benoy (Benoy Bhushan) will be his 'father' in every line of action — self-sacrificing, but limited in his sphere of action. Mano (Manomohan) will combine the feelings of his father, the grand ambitions of a cosmopolitan spirit that hate and abhor angle and corner feelings, with the poetry of his grandfather, Rajnarain Bose. Ara (Arabinda), I hope, will yet glorify his country by a brilliant administration.... He is at King's College, Cambridge, now borne there by his own ability.³⁶

The letter was written from Khulna on 2nd December 1892. At that time Sri Aurobindo was supposed to be undergoing his I.C.S. probationership, and his father had every reason to believe that "Ara... will yet glorify his country by a brilliant administration". And, indeed, although it was a strain to be classical scholar as well as civil service probationer, Sri Aurobindo did very well in both. On the other hand, as the months passed, he was unable to bring his heart into the I.C.S. career. He

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 108.

³⁶ *The Orient* (Illustrated Weekly), 27 February 1949.

got through the terminal examinations all right, but didn't retain the rank he had won in July 1890. There, however, remained one or two more hurdles. On 24 August 1892, Mr. Lockhart, Secretary to the Civil Service Commissioners, reported to the India Office that A. A. Ghose (Aravinda Ackroyd Ghose) was still to satisfy the Commissioners in respect of health and riding proficiency. He passed his medical examination in due course, but even as late as 4 November 1892, Sri Aurobindo was yet to pass the riding test. Four different chances were apparently given to him (from 9 August to 15 November), but he failed to appear for the test. On 17 November, therefore, the Civil Service Commissioners informed the India Office that they were "unable to certify that he is qualified to be appointed to the Civil Service in India".³⁷

The question has often been asked why, having secured the 11th place in the open competitive examination in July 1890, and passed subsequently two periodical and the final examinations, Sri Aurobindo repeatedly failed to take the riding test? Later on, in one of his 'evening talks' at Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo is reported to have said:

It was partly father's fault that I failed in the riding test. He did not send money, and riding lessons at Cambridge at that time were rather costly. And the (riding) master was also careless; so long as he got the money, he simply left me with the horse, and I was not particular....³⁸

On the crucial day, 15 November 1892, when Sri Aurobindo should have been at Woolwich for the riding test, he didn't go there, and he wasn't at his house

³⁷ Purani, *Life*, p. 34. ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 51.

either. Actually, according to his own admission later, he was wandering in the streets of London and came home late in the evening and told Benoy Bhushan "I am chucked" with a faint derisive smile. Manomohan, dropping in later and learning how matters stood, "set up a howl as if the heavens had fallen".³⁹ From all this, perhaps, it might be inferred — as indeed Sri Aurobindo himself later explained — that "he felt no call for the I.C.S., and was seeking some way to escape from that bondage. By certain manoeuvres, he managed to get himself disqualified for riding without himself rejecting the Service, which his family would not have allowed him to do".⁴⁰ His father was thinking great things about Sri Aurobindo's future as a brilliant administrator in India and had even, through Sir Henry Cotton, arranged provisionally to get a posting in the district of Arrah. But "all that came down like a wall"; as for Sri Aurobindo himself, he remarked quizzically: "I wonder what would have happened to me if I had joined the Civil Service. I think they would have chucked me for laziness and arrears of work".⁴¹

There is an interesting sequel too to this affair. The "rejection" came as a disappointment, not only to Sri Aurobindo's brothers in England, but also to well-wishers like his tutor Mr. Prothero and his friend, Mr. James S. Cotton. The former wrote to Cotton a letter which he transmitted to the Civil Service Commissioners. After giving an enthusiastic account of Sri Aurobindo's character and abilities, Prothero added:

That a man of this calibre should be lost to the Indian Government merely because he failed in

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 40. ⁴⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 12.

⁴¹ *Purani, Life*, pp. 46-7.

sitting on a horse or did not keep an appointment appears to me, I confess, a piece of official short-sightedness which it would be hard to beat... if he is finally tossed out, it will be, however legally justifiable, a moral injustice to him, and a very real loss to the Indian Government.⁴²

Benoy Bhushan and Cotton also persuaded Sri Aurobindo himself to present a petition to the Earl of Kimberley, the India Secretary, on 21 November. While Mr. G. W. Russell, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, noted that Sri Aurobindo might be given another chance for qualifying and added that "the candidate seems to me a remarkably deserving man and I can quite believe that poverty was the cause of his failure to appear", Lord Kimberley took the opposite view: "I am sorry I cannot take a compassionate view as Mr. Russell suggests.... I should much doubt whether Mr. Ghose would be a desirable addition to the Service".⁴³ The final rejection came on 7 December, but a subsequent communication authorised the payment of the probationership allowance of £150 still due to Sri Aurobindo. And it was actually paid on 22 December 1892

On a review of the available evidence it seems probable that an unnamed reason too must have taken a hand in finally determining Sri Aurobindo's exclusion from the Service. If he tried "certain manoeuvres" to get himself disqualified without himself rejecting the Service, Government too seems to have been only too ready to grasp at the straw of a technical reason for throwing out Sri Aurobindo. Lord Kimberley's ominous "obiter dictum" ("I should much doubt whether Mr. Ghose would be a desirable addition to the Service")

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 38. ⁴³ Purani, *Life* (First Edition, 1958), p. 35.

leaves a bad taste. How did he arrive at his "obiter dictum"? It doesn't seem unlikely that he had come to know of Sri Aurobindo's speeches at the meetings of the Indian Majlis, his association with the "Lotus and Dagger", and even of his revolutionary bent of mind. As Sri Aurobindo recorded later, these must have had their part "in determining the authorities to exclude him from the Indian Civil Service; the failure in the riding test was only the occasion, for in some other cases an opportunity was given for remedying this defect in India itself".⁴⁴

Sri Aurobindo had left Cambridge finally in October 1892 and taken lodgings in London at 6, Burlington Road, Bayswater (now, 68, St. Stephen's Gardens). He seems to have been lucky in his landladies, one of whom he described as an angel. With the rejection from the Service an unalterable fact, it now became necessary to think of an alternative avenue of employment. He had his First in the First Part of the Classical Tripos, which would have given him his Cambridge degree had he passed the examination at the end of his third year in residence. But since he had but two years at his disposal, he had taken the examination at the end of the second year. To stay on to be able to appear for the Second Part at the end of four years was unthinkable. But even so he might have got the degree had he made an application for it, but he did not think it necessary to do so; he did not presumably think that a degree as such was particularly valuable, since he had no intention then of taking up a purely academic career.⁴⁵ His friend, James Cotton, was able to arrange an interview with the Gaekwar of Baroda, the late Sayaji Rao, who was then on a visit to England. The interview was a

⁴⁴ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 13. ⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 10

success, and Sri Aurobindo secured appointment in the Baroda State Service. Mr. Cotton had completed the negotiations, and the Gaekwar was indeed "very pleased to have an I.C.S. man for Rs. 200 a month".⁴⁶ It was also decided that Sri Aurobindo would leave for India by the *Carthage* towards the end of December 1892. He had already decided to drop 'Ackroyd' from his name and would henceforth be 'Aravinda Ghose' or 'Aurobindo' only.

V

Sri Aurobindo, like his brother Manomohan, — they were, indeed, in the Horatian phrase *par nobile fratrum*, a noble pair of brothers, — had, as mentioned earlier, started writing English verse even during his stay in England. Several of the poems written by Sri Aurobindo between his eighteenth and twentieth year and a few written later were published as *Songs to Myrtilla and Other Poems* in 1895 at Baroda for private circulation only, and carried the inscription, "To my brother Manomohan Ghose these poems are dedicated". A second edition appeared in 1923 from Calcutta with the addition of *Transiit, Non Periiit*, the commemoration piece on his grandfather, Rajnarain Bose, who died in 1899. We shall glance at some of these poems here before we follow Sri Aurobindo to Baroda.

A poet's first essays in verse are akin to promissory notes; they have some value, no doubt, — their "face value" as we might call it; but what is even more important is that they give the reader a foretaste of the fu-

⁴⁶ Purani, *Life*, p. 41.

ture, open up vistas of possibility when the promissory notes would be fully redeemed at last. Sri Aurobindo's early adventures in English verse were thus the promissory notes of a millionaire confident of his credit. "No one with a ear for sound-values, an eye for apt images and a little ability to look below the surface", writes K. D. Sethna, "can fail to observe that his (Sri Aurobindo's) juvenalia hold just the right kind of promise.... And who can deny either music or imaginative subtlety to Sri Aurobindo when in his *Songs to Myrtilla*, written largely in his late teens under the influence of a close contact with the Greek Muse, he gives us piece after finely-wrought piece of natural magic?"⁴⁷

"Juvenile" these poems may be, yet are they the "juvenile" poems of a truly exceptional talent that had won through a mastery of the classics of Greece and Rome the master-key that unlocked the sumless treasuries of Western culture. Sensitive to beauty in its diverse forms and intensities, he could respond to the authentic with his whole soul. Since early childhood he had felt a strong hatred and disgust for every kind of cruelty and oppression, and this feeling had but deepened and grown more poignant in his years of adolescence and youth. Naturally enough, these early poems snap Sri Aurobindo in various emotional and intellectual attitudes and reveal also his tightening craftsmanship in verse, making a significant record of the education and ideas, imagination and feelings, engendered by a purely European culture. The derivative element is prominent enough, the names and lineaments and allusions appearing rather exotic to an Indian reader; but, then, knowing as he did at the time hardly anything about India and her cul-

⁴⁷ Sri Aurobindo—*The Poet* (1970), p. 2.

ture, Sri Aurobindo couldn't have written in any other strain. In like manner, the poems on Indian themes — the *Radha* poems, for example, or those on Madhusudan and Bankim Chandra — were attempts to express his "first reactions to India and Indian culture after the return home and a first acquaintance with these things".⁴⁸ The literary echoes are certainly there, and in profusion, but these — whether Western or Indian — only enhance the poetic flavour; and the result always is very good poetry.

Songs to Myrtila, the title-piece in the volume of that name, is cast in the form of a debate between Glaucus and Aethon, who expatiate on the attractions and felicities of night and day respectively. Glaucus'

Sweet is the night, sweet and cool
 As to parched lips a running pool...
 When earth is full of whispers, when
 No daily voice is heard of men,
 But higher audience brings
 The footsteps of invisible things...
 Pleasant 'tis then heart-overawed to lie
 Alone with that clear moonlight and that listening
sky...

is neatly met by Aethon's:

But day is sweeter; morning bright
 Has put the stars out ere the light.⁴⁹

It is a variation of the *Il Penseroso* — L'Allegro colloquy, for like Milton, Sri Aurobindo was a classicist too,

⁴⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 16.

⁴⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 1 Aethon's words might recall Fitzgerald's:

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
 Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight.

and a classicist when young cannot choose but see and hear, he cannot choose but catch, like the shower in the sunshine, dazzling rainbow hues and present them for our edification and delight. These early poems of Sri Aurobindo's are the effusions of a rich mind burdened by an adolescent sensibility; they are sensuous and impassioned, and there are brilliant evocations of sound and colour as in the following passages from the same song-sequence. This is Aethon speaking:

Behold in emerald fire
The spotted lizard crawl
Upon the sun-kissed wall
And coil in tangled brake
The green and sliding snake
Under the red-rose briar...⁵⁰

And this is Glaucus, votary of Night:

Love's feet were on the sea
When he dawned on me...
His rose-lit cheeks, his eyes' pale bloom
Were sorrow's anteroom;
His wings did cause melodious moan;
His mouth was like a rose o'erblown;
The cypress-garland of renown
Did make his shadowy crown;

and here is Aethon again, reiterating the claims of Light:

And I have ever known him (Love) wild
And merry as a child,
As roses red, as roses sweet,
The west wind in his feet,
Tulip-girdled, kind and bold,
With heartsease in his curls of gold,

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp 3-4.

Since in the silver mist
 Bright Cymothœa's lips I kissed,
 Whose laughter dances like a gleam
 Of sunlight on a hidden stream...⁵¹

Oh yes — oh dear yes — the lines trip merrily, glide along easily, the very conceits are pretty and convincing, and we are not, after all, put out by the company of the Florimels and Cymothœas and Myrtillas and Dryads who seem to people this strange and far country.

This is what has apparently happened: a supersensibility for Greek and an impeccable feeling for the nuances of English sound and rhythm have enabled the youthful Sri Aurobindo to invoke the blushful Hippocrene herself with infallible success. What can be more sensuously Greek and reminiscently Keatsian than *Night by the Sea*, with its lilt and sparkle, and its suggestion of mystery and love's languour and romance:

Love, a moment drop thy hands;
 Night within my soul expands.
 Veil thy beauties milk-rose-fair
 In that dark and showering hair.
 Coral kisses ravish not
 When the soul is tinged with thought....
 Not we first nor we alone
 Heard the mighty Ocean moan
 By this treasure-house of flowers
 In the sweet ambiguous hours....
 Beauty pays her boon of breath
 To thy narrow credit, Death,
 Leaving a brief perfume; we
 Perish also by the sea....⁵²

Didn't Keats say: "Ay, in the very temple of delight/

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 5-6. ⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 18ff.

Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine"? Live and perish, love and cease — night and sea cover up everything. It is a long poem, but the trochaic measure and the regular rhyme-beat carry the reader along, past "soft narcissi's golden camp", "the widening East" and the "rose of Indian grain".

The same metrical proficiency can also be seen in poems like *The Lover's Complaint* and *Love in Sorrow*; neither the burden of classical allusion in the former nor the accents of romantic frustration that punctuate the latter should blind us to the reality of poignant grief that sustains the two lyrics as moving poetic utterances. The reader, however, is occasionally intrigued: what, for instance, could be the contextual relevance of these six lines:

For there was none who loved me, no, not one.

Alas, what was there that a man should love?

For I was misery's last and frailest son

And even my mother bade me homeless rove.

And I had wronged my youth and nobler powers

By weak attempts, small failures, wasted hours.⁵⁸

Whose "glorious beauty stained with gold" the poet will behold no more? Who is Nisa, and who is Mopsus for whom she has forsaken the lover in *The Lover's Complaint*:

O plaintive, murmuring reed, renew thy strain;

O solace anguish yet again.

I thought Love soft as velvet sleep,

Sweeter than dews nocturnal breezes weep,

Cool as water in a murmuring pass

And shy as violets in the vernal grass,

But hard as Nisa's heart is he

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

And salt as the unharvestable sea.⁵⁴

It is unwise — and usually futile — to turn from poetry to poetolatry. The poems are, perhaps, just poems, temperamental effusions in terms of impassioned verse; or — who knows? — Sri Aurobindo has turned into image and myth his personal emotions and feelings on the eve of his departure from England.

Another early poem, the elegiac *The Island Grave*, opens magnificently:

Ocean is there and evening; the slow moan

Of the blue waves that like a shaken robe

Two heard together once, one hears alone.⁵⁵

Estelle is almost radiant with a spiritual glow, and foreshadows the maturer Sri Aurobindo:

Why do thy lucid eyes survey,

Estelle, their sisters in the milky way?

The blue heavens cannot see

Thy beauty nor the planets praise.

Blindly they walk their old accustomed ways.

Turn hither for felicity.

My body's earth thy vernal power declares,

My spirit is a heaven of a thousand stars,

And all these lights are thine and open doors

on thee.⁵⁶

Besides love and death and day and light and soul's immensity, Sri Aurobindo had other things too to occupy his thoughts, — politics, for instance, and the career of poets and political leaders. *Hic Jacet* (Glasnevin Cemetery) and *Charles Stewart Parnell (1891)* are both vigorous expressions of Sri Aurobindo's political sensibility,

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 22. (In the main, the poem is based on Virgil's Eighth Eclogue.)

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 27. ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28.

and are immediately effective by reason of their clarity and strength. Like Macaulay's *A Jacobite's Epitaph*, Sri Aurobindo's *Hic Jacet* also achieves its severe beauty through sheer economy of words: Jacobean or Irish patriot, the end is the same:

Forget all feuds, and shed one English tear
O'er English dust. A broken heart lies here.

(*A Jacobite's Epitaph*)

Patriots, behold your guerdon...
Where sits he?... Beneath this stone
He lies: this guerdon only Ireland gave,
A broken heart and an unhonoured grave.

(*Hic Jacet*)

The influence of Macaulay's poem on Sri Aurobindo must, however, have been unconscious, for he seems never to have read *The Lays of Ancient Rome* after early childhood; and *A Jacobite's Epitaph*, in particular, had made little impression on Sri Aurobindo, and he had not probably read it even twice.⁵⁷ Yet the parallelism is striking enough, and the two poems deserve to be read together.

The six lines on Parnell, again, have a pointed adequacy in phrasing, and their juxtaposition with *The Lost Deliverer* that appears on the same page is very suggestive. Parnell, even he — once most feared and most hated — even he was to prove but a "child of tragic earth"! No less deserving of praise is the metallic finish of this portrait of Goethe:

A perfect face amid barbarian faces,
A perfect voice of sweet and serious rhyme,
Traveller with calm, inimitable paces,
Critic with judgment absolute to all time,

⁵⁷ Sri Aurobindo *on Himself*, p. 17.

A complete strength when men were maimed and

weak.⁵⁸

Admirer of Parnell and Goethe, lover of Greece and Ireland, young Sri Aurobindo wanted to lay deep the foundations of his faith, to plan and work out the details of his future course of action. Even when he was gripped by the march of events in Ireland, wasn't he thinking in the hinterland of his consciousness of his own country, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the insolence of office and the pangs of subjection — and of the things that needed to be done there before she could redeem herself in her own and in the eyes of the world?

Sri Aurobindo's nonage was over; he would be an exile in England no more. He was going back to India, — to India the Mother. He looked back at the past fourteen years, — years of study and striving, of loneliness and privation, of aspiration and partial fulfilment. During this period he had developed an attachment to English poetry and European thought and literature, though not to England as a country. While his brother Manomohan had for a time actually looked upon England as his adopted country, Sri Aurobindo had never done so; and it was France — not England — that intellectually and emotionally fascinated Sri Aurobindo, notwithstanding the fact that he had neither lived in it nor even seen it. Thus the thought of leaving England induced no real regrets in Sri Aurobindo. He had developed no sentimental attachment to the immediate past — his stay of fourteen years in England — and he had no misgivings about the future either. He had made but few friendships in England, and none very intimate comparable to Manomohan's with Laurence Binyon; Sri Aurobindo had, as a matter of

⁵⁸ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 9.

fact, never found the mental atmosphere of England congenial to the movements of his mind and the tremors of his sensibility. Anyhow, he was leaving England, — but why had he ever been sent away by his Mother, — “Mother of might, Mother free” — to that distant country? Sri Aurobindo felt the flutter of unutterable thoughts. It is in his *Envoi*, which appears at the end of *Songs to Myrtilla*, that Sri Aurobindo casts one last look at the Western world that he is leaving and also thrills in anticipation of the beloved country he is returning to —

For in Sicilian olive-groves no more
Or seldom must my footprints now be seen,
Nor tread Athenian lanes, nor yet explore
Parnassus or thy voiceful shores, O Hippocrene.

Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of

Eden blow.⁵⁹

No more would he devote himself to Greek poetry as he had done during the past few years; no more would he exchange alexandrines and hexameters with the faded poets of ancient Greece and Rome; no more would he feel the heart-beats of European culture in their warmth and vivacity. That chapter was ended for good; and — “Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new!” It is significant too that Sri Aurobindo is already talking of the Ganges and of the “regions of eternal snow” rather than of Baroda or Narmada or Mount Abu. Baroda would be a stepping-stone, convenient and welcome enough, but

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 36.

Sri Aurobindo's real work would embrace all India; and he seems to have known it—somehow very clearly glimpsed it—from the very outset.

CHAPTER THREE

BARODA

I

Sri Aurobindo's arrival in India early in February 1893 was preceded by his father Dr. Krishnadhan's death in peculiarly tragic circumstances. Even as late as 2 December 1892, as may be inferred from his letter (referred to in the previous chapter) of that date to his brother-in-law Jogendra, Dr. Krishnadhan was feeling almost certain that his son Aurobindo would be entering the Indian Civil Service and making his mark as a brilliant administrator. Sometime later information seems to have reached Krishnadhan of Sri Aurobindo's failure to get into the Service and of the Baroda appointment. He also heard from Grindlays, his bankers, of Sri Aurobindo's departure from England by a particular boat which, however, went down off the coast of Portugal near Lisbon and many lives were lost. When the news was telegraphed to Krishnadhan by Grindlays (who didn't know that Sri Aurobindo actually left by a later boat), it came as a stunning blow; he concluded that his beloved son Aurobindo was lost for ever, and as he suffered from a weak heart he collapsed the same night and died uttering Aurobindo's name in lamentation.¹ A slightly different recital of events occurs in Brajendranath De's *Reminiscences of an Indian Member of I.C.S.* that appeared in 1954 in the *Calcutta Review*. Till the end Dr. Krishnadhan had believed that his son had been admitted into the Service and had, in fact, gone to

¹ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* (1966), p. 191.

Bombay to receive him and bring him home in triumph. Unable to get any definite news, Dr. Krishnadhan had returned to Khulna feeling depressed, and one afternoon he received a wire from his agents in Bombay that his son's name was not in the list of passengers who were travelling by the boat in which his son too was supposed to be coming:

It so happened that the very night he and the Superintendent of Police were coming to dine at my house. The dinner was ready, the Superintendent came, but there was no sign of the doctor, although his bungalow was quite close to my house. After waiting for some time, I sent an orderly to remind him.... The man came back and informed me that the doctor was very ill. I at once went round and heard of the telegram and found the doctor very ill and quite unconscious. The other medical men in the station were assiduous in their attention. I did what I could. But it was of no avail. The poor man lingered on for a day or two and then passed away.²

The accounts, however, agree in essentials: hope deferred — disappointment — shock. And so Dr. Krishnadhan died before he could set his eyes on any one of the three sons on whom he had built such high hopes.

It was all a tragic misunderstanding due to defective communication, for as a matter of fact Sri Aurobindo had left England by a later boat, the *Carthage*. His elder brothers too arrived, though later; Benoy Bhushan was to serve under the Maharaja of Cooch-Behar, and Manomohan was to become Professor of English at the Presidency College, Calcutta. The prodigal boys returned

² Quoted in Purani, *Life*, pp 54-5.

home at long last, Sri Aurobindo first, the others later; they were now stalwart young men, well-set apparently in life — but Dr. Krishnadhan's strong heroic soul had already passed away.

When, after an absence of fourteen years, Sri Aurobindo set foot on the soil of India, when he touched the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, "a vast calm descended upon him... and this calm surrounded him and remained for long months afterwards".³ It was as though the Mother had received her child back and enveloped him with her infinite immaculate love. Many years later, Sri Aurobindo made a reference to this transfiguring experience in the course of a letter to one of his disciples:

My own life and my yoga have always been, since my coming to India, both this-worldly and other-worldly without any exclusiveness on either side... since I set foot on the Indian soil on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, I began to have spiritual experiences, but these were not divorced from this world but had an inner and infinite bearing on it, such as a feeling of the Infinite pervading material space and the Immanent inhabiting material objects and bodies. At the same time I found myself entering supraphysical worlds and planes with influences and an effect from them upon the material plane, so that I could make no sharp divorce or irreconcilable opposition between what I have called the two ends of existence and all that lies between them.⁴

In my end is my beginning, in my beginning is my end. The end of the sojourn to England meant the beginning

³ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 84.

⁴ *On Yoga II*, Tome One (1958), p. 129.

of the Indian experience which, in the fulness of time, was to embrace "the two ends of existence and all that lies between them".

Sri Aurobindo spent about thirteen years in the Baroda State Service. He joined on 8 February 1893 and he severed his connection finally on 18 June 1907. He was first put in the Land Settlement Department, not as an officer, but to learn the procedural formalities of the administration; he then moved to the Stamps and Revenue Departments; and he also worked for some time in the Secretariat drawing up important despatches. Since 1895, he became part-time lecturer in French at the Baroda College, and presently other work was also added, and in 1900 he was appointed, on the strong recommendation of Principal Tait, as permanent Professor of English on a pay of Rs. 360 per month. In 1904, he was appointed Vice-Principal on Rs. 550 per month, and next year he acted as Principal from April to September on a consolidated salary of Rs. 710 per month. This steady advancement at the Baroda College notwithstanding, Sri Aurobindo's services seem to have been utilised, from time to time, partly in the Government Departments and partly by the Maharaja himself in a confidential capacity. Whenever he thought fit, he would send for Sri Aurobindo for writing letters, composing speeches or drawing up documents of various kinds which needed special care in phrasing. At one time, the Maharaja asked Sri Aurobindo to give instruction in English grammar by giving exact and minute rules for each construction! On another occasion, he was asked to advise on travel after consulting the time-tables of European railways. But all this was quite informal, Sri Aurobindo being usually invited to breakfast with

the Maharaja and staying on to do the work entrusted to him, — like the writing of an order, or a letter to the British Government, or some other important memorandum. Once Sri Aurobindo was specially sent for to Ootacamund in order to prepare a precis of the whole Bapat case and the judicial opinions on it.

At least on two occasions, Sri Aurobindo joined him on his holidays — in the summer of 1901 at Naini Tal and in April 1903 in Kashmir. In a letter from Naini Tal to Bhuvan Chakravarty, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The place is a beautiful one, but not half so cold as I expected. In fact, in daytime it is only a shade less hot than Baroda except when it has been raining".⁵ During the Kashmir trip, Sri Aurobindo was appointed Secretary to the Maharaja, "but there was much friction between them during the tour and the experiment was not repeated".⁶ It is said that, on one occasion, the Maharaja sent for Sri Aurobindo twice in the course of a morning; not meeting with any response, the Maharaja went himself to Sri Aurobindo's room, found him asleep, and returned without disturbing him.⁷ Another interesting sidelight to the relations between Sri Aurobindo and the Maharaja is given by Nirodbaran. The Maharaja had once issued a circular requiring all officers to attend office even on Sundays and other holidays. But Sri Aurobindo seems merely to have said, "Let him fine as much as he likes, I am not going". The Maharaja had to give up!⁸ Notwithstanding these stresses and strains,

⁵ Purani, *Life*, p. 69.

⁶ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 21.

⁷ Private information given by Prof W. L. Kulkarni of Marathavada University, who heard the story from the historian, Sardesai, who had been of the Maharaja's party too.

⁸ From the talk on 'Sri Aurobindo—Perfect Gentleman' in *Mother*

Prince and Professor seem to have entertained high mutual regard and respect. On the whole, Sri Aurobindo was brilliant and quick and efficient in work, though he was not exactly the ideal servant for an Indian Maharaja. On his part, the Maharaja gave Sri Aurobindo a certificate for ability and intelligence, but also for lack of regularity and punctuality. With the Maharaja's Court as such, however, Sri Aurobindo had hardly anything to do during the whole course of his stay at Baroda, though very occasionally he may have participated in a function in the Palace itself like the reception to Dr. S.K.Mullick.⁹

Sri Aurobindo's most intimate friend at Baroda was Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav, who was associated with him in his political ideas and helped him in later years, whenever possible, in his political work. Among his other friends were Khasirao Jadhav and Keshava Rao G. Deshpande, the latter of whom Sri Aurobindo had known at Cambridge. In the early years at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo often stayed either with Khasirao or his brother Madhavrao, but later he used to rent a house or lived in quarters provided by the Government. Books, books were his major preoccupation; the Bombay firms of booksellers, Thacker Spink and Radhabai Atmaram, supplied him regularly with the latest catalogues, and he then placed orders for selected books which duly arrived in bulky parcels by passenger train. His personal library thus came to include some of the latest books in English,

India, August 1970, p. 408.

⁹ Dr. Karan Singh mentions in a footnote on p. 43 of his book *Prophet of Indian Nationalism* (Bhavan's Edition, 1967) that the Maharaja's only daughter, now the dowager Maharani of Cooch-Bihar, gave the information that Sri Aurobindo used to come to the Palace to teach her and her brothers, but he was too immersed in himself to pay much attention to them.

French, German, Latin, Greek — and of course all the major English poets from Chaucer to Swinburne. A cousin of Sri Aurobindo's, Basanti Devi, has given us this amusing account of his addiction to books and his habit of carrying trunkloads of them wherever he went:

Auro Dada used to arrive with two or three trunks, and we always thought they would contain costly suits and other articles of luxury like scents, etc. When he opened them I used to look at them and wonder. What is this? A few ordinary clothes and all the rest books and nothing but books! Does Auro Dada like to read all these? We want to chat and enjoy ourselves in vacations, does he want to spend even this time in reading these books?¹⁰

In the choice of books, Sri Aurobindo seems to have had a natural partiality for literature (especially poetry), history and even some politics, but not for philosophy. He was not attracted to metaphysics, and he found the disputes of dialectical ratiocination too abstract, abstruse and generally inconclusive. Before coming to Baroda, he had read something of Plato, as well as Epictetus and the Lucretian statement of the ideas of Epicurus. Only such philosophical ideas as could be made dynamic for life interested him. Beyond a nodding acquaintance with the broad ideas of certain European philosophers, he had no interest in the highways and byways of Western philosophical thought. Of the Indian philosophers also he had read only some of their main conclusions. Actually, his first real acquaintance with Indian spirituality was through the reported sayings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the speeches and writings of Swami Vivekananda. Sri Aurobindo had certainly an immense

¹⁰ Quoted in Purani, *Life*, p 66

admiration for Vivekananda and a deeper feeling still for Ramakrishna. But Sri Aurobindo did not accept altogether Vivekananda's philosophy or Advaitic standpoint; and though spiritual experiences interested him greatly, and he had had some himself, he was not — not as yet — inclined to the actual practice of yoga. His experiences began in England, perhaps in 1892, and from the moment he stepped on the shores of India they became more frequent and more intense. But he did not associate them with yoga about which he knew nothing at the time. Even when he was asked by Keshavrao Deshpande, himself a sadhak, to take up the practice of yoga, Sri Aurobindo declined since it seemed to him then merely a retreat from life.

II

Some months after reporting himself to duty at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo paid a visit to Bengal and met all his relations. His mother could hardly recognise him; "My Aurobindo was not so big, he was small!" she is said to have exclaimed. But she remembered a childhood cut on his finger, and finding it still there, she was satisfied that it was her own Aurobindo. His younger sister, Sarojini, found that he had "a very delicate face, long hair cut in English fashion"; and she described him as "a very shy person".¹¹ Sri Aurobindo was also delighted to see again his uncle, Jogendra, and especially his grandfather, Rajnarain Bose. The return to Baroda after the family reunion was not quite to Sri Aurobindo's liking, as

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 60.

may be inferred from a letter he wrote to Sarojini on 25 August 1894:

There is an old story about Judas Iscariot, which suits me down to the ground. Judas, after betraying Christ, hanged himself and went to Hell where he was honoured with the hottest oven in the whole establishment. Here he must burn for ever and ever; but in his life he had done one kind act and for this they permitted him by special mercy of God to cool himself for an hour every Christmas on an iceberg in the North Pole. Now this has always seemed to me not mercy, but a peculiar refinement of cruelty. For how could Hell fail to be ten times more Hell to the poor wretch after the delicious coolness of his iceberg? I do not know for what enormous crime I have been condemned to Baroda, but my case is just parallel. Since my pleasant sojourn with you at Baidyanath, Baroda seems a hundred times more Baroda.¹²

How prettily Sri Aurobindo laughs away his sense of exile; and how sweetly, yet indirectly, he compliments his sister! No wonder people found his private talk full of wit and humour and gentleness and infinite understanding. The latter part of the letter shows that Benoy Bhushan and Manomohan were still in England (though they were expected any day in Calcutta), and that Sri Aurobindo was trying to learn in real earnest both Bengali and Gujarati. The letter concludes with a reference to his recent birthday ("I have just passed my twenty-second milestone, August 15 last, since my birthday, and am beginning to get dreadfully old") and also to Sarojini's progress in her English studies:

¹² *ibid.*, p. 61.

I hope you will learn very quickly; I can then write to you quite what I want to say and just in the way I want to say it. I feel some difficulty in doing that now and I don't know whether you will understand it.¹³

Sarojini's education was very near to his heart, and he used to make remittances regularly to meet the expenses of her education at Bankipore and the maintenance of their mother. His younger brother, Barindra, was also with Sarojini at the time, though later he often stayed at Baroda. Even after their return to India, Benoy Bhushan and Manomohan were not in a position to help the family. For this Sri Aurobindo offered a good-humoured yet disarming explanation: "Dada is in Cooch-behar State service, and so he has to maintain a high standard of living. Manomohan is married, and marriage is an expensive luxury!"¹⁴

Already, while still at Cambridge, he had tried to learn a little Bengali, since as an I. C. S. probationer he had opted for service in Bengal. His teacher in Bengali, Mr. Robert Mason Towers ("Pandit Towers", as he came to be called), himself knew little, his knowledge of Bengali being limited to Vidyasagar's works. Once he seems to have told Sri Aurobindo that Bankim's writing was not Bengali!¹⁵ After coming to India, Sri Aurobindo soon learnt enough by his own efforts and was able to appreciate the novels of Bankim Chandra and the poetry of Madhusudan. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo went further still, for in 1898 he engaged a teacher — a young Bengali litterateur by name Dinendra Kumar Roy — perhaps as a companion more than as a teacher, for his work was merely "to help Sri Aurobindo to correct and perfect his knowledge of

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 62. ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 64. ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 45.

the language and to accustom him to conversation in Bengali."¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo also started, unaided, to delve into the treasures of Sanskrit literature, and presently to familiarise himself with Marathi and Gujarati as well. He was thus able by and by to read and appreciate the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the masterpieces of Kalidasa, the *shatakas* of Bhartrihari, not to mention the classics of modern Bengali literature. Sri Aurobindo was in this manner happily restored to his great cultural heritage, and never again would he be induced to lose it! He was thrilled by the poetry of Madhusudan, he was deeply stirred by the creations of Bankim. Of Madhusudan, Sri Aurobindo sang an anthem that is both a melodious dirge and a piece of critical appraisal:

Poet, who first with skill inspired did teach
Greatness to our divine Bengali speech, — ...
No human hands such notes ambrosial moved;
These accents are not of the imperfect earth;
Rather the God was voiceful in their birth,
The god himself of the enchanting flute,
The god himself took up thy pen and wrote.¹⁷

As for Bankim, there are two poems: the shorter 'Saraswati with the Lotus' and the longer 'Bankim Chandra Chatterji'. "Thy tears fall fast, O mother" begins the first, the emotion held taut in its six poignant lines; but the second is more elaborate:

O master of delicious words! the bloom
Of chompuk and the breath of king-perfume
Have made each musical sentence with the noise
Of women's ornaments and sweet household joys...
All nature in a page, no pleasing show

¹⁶ *Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram* (1948), p. 5 (fn.).

¹⁷ *Collected Poems and plays*, Vol. I, pp. 33-4.

But men more real than the friends we know...
 His nature kingly was and as a god
 In large serenity and light he trod
 His daily way, yet beauty, like soft flowers
 Wreathing a hero's sword, ruled all his hours.
 Thus moving in these iron times and drear,
 Barren of bliss and robbed of golden cheer,
 He sowed the desert with ruddy-hearted rose,
 The sweetest voice that ever spoke in prose.¹⁸

And although Sri Aurobindo mastered Bengali sufficiently to be able, later on, to conduct a weekly (*Dharma*) in Bengali, writing most of the articles himself, his control over the language was not quite as consummate or fluent as over English. While he could make the English language a fit and natural vehicle for the expression of the roll and thunder of politics as also of the peaceful sublime of spiritual fervour or ecstasy, he could never address, to his regret, a Bengali audience in their own mother tongue.¹⁹ That price, at any rate, he had to pay for his long and enforced separation from the Mother.

It is to the Bengali tutor, Dinendra Kumar Roy, that we owe some particulars regarding Sri Aurobindo's everyday life at Baroda. After all, they lived together in terms of friendly companionship, and the tutor had every opportunity of observing and forming an opinion of Sri Aurobindo's life in action. "Desireless, a man of few words, balanced in his diet, self-controlled, always given to study", reading far into the night, and hence a late riser; "Sri Aurobindo is not a man of this earth, he is a god come down from heaven by some curse!"²⁰ Sri

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 32

¹⁹ *Speeches* by Sri Aurobindo (3rd Edition, 1952), pp. 34, 125.

²⁰ Purani, *Life*, pp. 53, 65.

Aurobindo's morning hours were usually devoted to the writing of poetry, and he read newspapers and journals while taking his meals. More bread than rice, fish or meat once a day, and from time to time a pure vegetarian diet — generally indifferent to taste, although he found Marathi food too hot (because of the chillies) and Gujarati food too rich (because of the ghee). At one time, according to the testimony of R. N. Patkar (who had been his student), Sri Aurobindo took no cooked food in the evenings but only fruit and milk. When he was absorbed in reading, he could be wholly oblivious of his surroundings. One evening his servant had brought his meal with the words, *Sab, khana rakha hai* (Master, the meal is served); *Achcha* (All right) was the answer. But an hour later, the servant found that the master was still reading, the dishes on the table being untouched! Sri Aurobindo seems to have been equally indifferent to money as to personal comforts, food or clothes. Mr. Patkar's report on this point is worth quoting, as it gives a hint of the shape of things to come:

He used to get the lump sum of three months' pay in a bag which he emptied in a tray lying on his table. He never bothered to keep money in a safe box under lock and key. He did not keep an account of what he spent. One day I casually asked him why he was keeping his money like that. He laughed and then replied: "Well, it is a proof that we are living in the midst of honest and good people". "But you never keep an account which may testify to the honesty of the people around you?" I asked him. Then with a serene face he said: "It is God who keeps account for me. He

gives me as much as I want and keeps the rest to Himself. At any rate, He does not keep me in want, then why should I worry?"²¹

He had always enough, and never less than enough, and never more than enough. "He was alone", writes Dinendra Kumar Roy (with reference to 1898-9, the time he spent with Sri Aurobindo), "he did not know what it was to run after pleasures, he never spent even a 'pie' in the wrong way, and yet at the end of the month he had not a farthing in his hand!"²²

During the first years at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo usually managed to get away to spend the Puja holidays in Bengal with his family and relations. He had a deep attachment to his grandfather, Rajnarain, and his death in September 1899 seemed the end of an age, the great river having lost itself in the infinite ocean oneness:

As when a sacred river in its course
Dives into ocean, there its strength abides
Not less because with vastness wed and works
Unnoticed in the grandeur of the tides ²³

III

As a Professor at the Baroda College — at different times he taught French or English and sometimes both — Sri Aurobindo effortlessly won the admiration and love of his pupils. Many of his pupils of those distant days — K. M. Munshi, for instance, who was Sri Aurobindo's student in 1903 — have eloquently testified to his tremendous hold on the undergraduates. At first, perhaps,

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 81. ²² *ibid.*, p. 65.

²³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 34.

he could not quite acclimatise himself to Indian conditions. His pupils found his lectures a bit "too stiff", and on his part he found his wards too passive "What was surprising to me was", he said many years later, "that students used to take down everything verbatim and mug it up. This sort of thing could never have happened in England". One reason was that, in Oxford or Cambridge and in the British universities generally, there was "a demand for the student's point of view". But in India the students were apt, not only to take down whatever their professors said, but more particularly to secure the notes of professors from Bombay, "especially if they happened to be examiners". Sri Aurobindo knew that, unlike his brother Manomohan who was painstaking with his books interleaved and crammed with notes, he himself "was not so conscientious as a professor". He had his sense of the text before him, he seized the meaning by direct intuitive grasp, and spoke as his mind and the moment directed him. Once while giving a lecture on Southey's *Life of Nelson* he said things not in agreement with what was given in the Notes of the edition being used by the students. When they brought this to his attention, he replied that he hadn't looked into the Notes, and they were mostly rubbish in any case! The main thing in the study of literature was to let the mind and sensibility come into direct contact with "the precious life-blood of a master-spirit" and absorb as much as possible.²⁴ Describing Sri Aurobindo's usual method of teaching, Mr. Patkar writes:

In the beginning he used to give a series of introductory lectures in order to initiate the students into the subject matter of the text. After that he

²⁴ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 120-1.

used to read the text, stopping where necessary to explain the meaning of difficult words and sentences. He ended by giving general lectures bearing on the various aspects of the subject matter of the text.²⁵

The method must have yielded salutary results, especially when applied to a classic like Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, which Sri Aurobindo taught in 1902. After the first years, Sri Aurobindo seems to have taken the measure of his wards and they too seem to have made the most of their exceptional opportunities, thereby turning the classes into adventures in the realms of ideas and values.

The influence Sri Aurobindo exercised on his students was not of course confined to the class-room, important as it was; he was, besides, the Charman of the Baroda College Union and Debating Society, and this brought him into contact, though less frequently, with the entire student body. He had to introduce visiting lecturers to the Union; he had to regulate the course of debates in such a way that the best in the students came out and they didn't miss the spirit of intellectual inquiry in the excitement of the moment. His own speeches — though they were not many — were doubtless memorable events in the history of the Union. "He was not an orator", says Mr. Patkar recapitulating the scene, "but was a speaker of a very high order, and he was listened to with rapt attention. Without any gesture or movement of the limbs he stood, and language flowed like a stream from his lips with natural ease and melody that kept the audience spell-bound".²⁶ Without the impact of the speaker's personality and the magic of his living voice,

²⁵ Purani, *Life*, p. 82. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 82.

it must be next to impossible to form a measure of Sri Aurobindo's power of public speech on the basis of a reported summary alone. Even so, a speech like the one he delivered before the College Social Gathering in 1899, and later printed in the *Baroda College Miscellany*, can give us some idea at least of the content and quality of his speeches at the Baroda College. The subject is Oxford and Cambridge, and what Indian Universities should learn from them. What does life at Oxford or Cambridge mean to a student who is privileged to be in residence for three years? Sri Aurobindo warms up to the answer and finds the right words:

He goes up from the restricted life of his home and school and finds himself in surroundings which with astonishing rapidity expand his intellect, strengthen his character, develop his social faculties, force out all his abilities and turn him in three years from a boy into a man. His mind ripens in the contact with minds which meet from all parts of the country and have been brought up in many various kinds of trainings, his unwholesome eccentricities wear away and the unsocial, egoistic elements of character are to a large extent discouraged. He moves among ancient and venerable buildings, the mere age and beauty of which are in themselves an education. He has the Union which has trained so many great orators and debaters, has been the first trial ground of so many renowned intellects. He has, too, the athletics clubs organised with a perfection unparalleled elsewhere, in which, if he has the physique and the desire for them, he may find pursuits which are also in themselves an education. The result is that he who entered the uni-

versity a raw student, comes out of it a man and a gentleman, accustomed to think of great affairs and fit to move in cultivated society, and he remembers his College and University with affection, and in after days if he meets with those who have studied with him, he feels attracted towards them as to men with whom he has a natural brotherhood. This is the social effect I should like the Colleges and Universities of India also to exercise, to educate by social influences as well as those which are merely academical and to create the feeling among their pupils that they belong to the community, that they are children of one Mother....

The academy (college or university) as a hallowed place that facilitates emotional integration, as a nursery for the children of the mother (Mother India), and as a means of building up a noble race, the future humanity in India—such, indeed, was the university ideal that Sri Aurobindo wished to set before his student-audience, and he thought too that, even with all our limitations, we could make an effort to realise the ideal. But Sri Aurobindo hastened to remind his hearers that the college or the university couldn't be expected to do everything, not even to give a 'complete' education:

But the University cannot and does not pretend to complete a man's education, it merely gives some materials to his hand or points out certain paths he may tread, and it says to him,—"Here are the materials I have given into your hands, it is for you to make of them what you can"; or—"These are the paths I have equipped you to travel; it is yours to tread them to the end, and by your success in them justify me before the world".

Words, words — even the most eloquent words — have effect on the audience only in proportion to the power with which they are charged by the speaker's personality. Sri Aurobindo stood before his eager-eyed audience composed largely of Gujarati and Marathi youths as a Bengali who had mastered, like Kacha in the asuric world, the lore of the West, but who had rejected (as Kacha did Devayani's) the blandishments of Western civilisation; they saw him as a scholar steeped in Greek, Latin, English and French classics but who nevertheless incarnated the spirit of Indian culture, the oneness in the Mother. They could sense that Sri Aurobindo's words were more than words; they were pointers to action, a call to realisation; and the words went home.

But of course Sri Aurobindo could not help contrasting Indian educational conditions with conditions at St Paul's or King's. The puny stature of the typical Indian undergraduate must have sorely pained Sri Aurobindo. How true was it of the Indian scholar, as it was true (though the context is different) of Dryden's Achitophel:

A fiery soul, which working out its way,

Fretted the pigmy body to decay:

And o'er informed the tenement of clay.²⁷

The average Indian scholar didn't care for physical culture, he had no joy in the art of robust and healthy living; on the contrary, becoming a spectacled bookworm at a tender age, he was given to excessive intellectual inbreeding. What wonder, then, that his general outlook was severely pessimistic in consequence? The Indian scholar ripened fast — all too fast — and there an end! What Sri Aurobindo wrote about the "cultured Bengali" was thus capable of a general application also:

²⁷ *Absalom and Achitophel*, ll. 156-8.

The cultured Bengali begins life with a physical temperament already delicate and highstrung. He has the literary constitution with its femineity and acute nervousness. Subject this to a cruel strain when it is tenderest and needs the most careful rearing, to the wicked and wantonly cruel strain of instruction through a foreign tongue, put it under the very worst system of training; add enormous academical labour, immense official drudgery in an unhealthy climate and constant mental application...²⁸

and need one be surprised by the results? Sri Aurobindo pondered over all these engines of our limitation, and sought the key that would turn limitations into opportunities, and frustration into triumph.

The superficial observer, indeed, saw no more than the externals of Sri Aurobindo's life: the professor who wore white drill suits, who kept a horse and carriage, who ordered quantities of books, who made visits to the Palace; but those — his friends and relations, his colleagues and pupils — who came into close contact with him, at least some of them, were conscious also of the power behind the person, the fire that seemed to burn within, the light that shone in the eyes. The late Dr. C. R. Reddy, who succeeded Sri Aurobindo as Vice-Principal of the Baroda College, has left this on record.

I had the honour of knowing him.... We had a number of friends in common. Mr. A. B. Clark, the Principal of the Baroda College, remarked to me, "So you met Aurobindo Ghosh. Did you notice his eyes? There is mystic fire and light in them. They penetrate into the beyond". And he added, "If Joan

²⁸ From the article on Bankim Chandra in the *Indu Prakash* (July 1894), now reprinted in *Bankim Chandra Chatterji* (1954), pp. 13-4.

of Arc heard heavenly voices, Aurobindo probably sees heavenly visions". Clark was a materialist of materialists. I have never been able to understand how that worldly but delightful person could have glimpsed the truth, then latent, about Aurobindo. But, then, does not the lightning's blinding flash, which lasts but a moment, leap forth from the dark black bosom of the cloud?²⁹

The reference to Joan of Arc was prophetic: if St. Joan was ultimately to redeem France, wasn't Sri Aurobindo destined likewise to be the redeemer of India?

IV

Soon after his arrival in India, Sri Aurobindo was invited by his Cambridge friend K. G. Deshpande, who was then English editor of the *Indu Prakash* of Bombay, to write articles on the political situation in the country. These appeared serially under the challenging caption 'New Lamps for Old' from 7 August 1893 to 6 March 1894, but they did not carry Sri Aurobindo's name. Introducing the series to the readers, K. G. Deshpande wrote in the issue of 7 August:

...Hypocrisy has been the besetting sin of our political agitation. Oblique vision is the fashion. True, matter of fact, honest criticism is very badly needed.... The questions at issue are momentous. It is the making or the unmaking of the nation. We have, therefore, secured a gentleman of great lite-

²⁹ From Dr C R Reddy's citation before the Andhra University Convocation (11 December 1948) on the occasion of the award *in absentia* of the National Prize in Humanities to Sri Aurobindo.

rary talents, of liberal culture and of considerable experience, well versed in the art of writing, at great personal inconvenience and probable misrepresentation, to give out his views in no uncertain voice and... in a style and direction peculiarly his own. We... assure them (our readers) that they will find in these articles matter that will set them thinking and stir their patriotic souls.

What was unusual about the articles was the fusion of a young man's intolerance and idealism and a wise man's deep and abiding wisdom. Sri Aurobindo began the series with the well-known, yet none the less always startling, question: "If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into a ditch?" It was some nine years since the Indian National Congress had commenced its activities with a blazing fanfare of trumpets and deafening bugle-sounds, — but where was the Promised Land?

The walls of the Anglo-Indian Jericho stand yet without a breach, and the dark spectacle of Penury draws her robe over the land in greater volume and with an ampler sweep.

What had gone wrong, then? Almost everything! The indictment is direct, at point-blank range as it were:

I say of the Congress, then, this — that its aims are mistaken, that the spirit in which it proceeds towards their accomplishment is not a spirit of sincerity and whole-heartedness, and that the methods it has chosen are not the right methods, and the leaders in whom it trusts are not the right sort of men to be leaders; — in brief, that we are at present the blind led, if not by the blind, at any rate by the one-eyed.

Hadn't there been "a little too much talk about the

blessings of British rule, and the inscrutable Providence which has laid us in the maternal, or more properly the step-maternal, bosom of just and benevolent England?" Its grandiose name notwithstanding, the Congress was not a popular body, its leaders were apt to swear by the false political gods of British manufacture, and they were only too ready to make a virtue of timidity, mere good manners and the disinclination to tell the direct truth. How could a set of complacent comfortable middle-class individuals speak and act on behalf of the millions comprising the proletariat? Pherozeshah Mehta and his friends might think that the proletariat was not important, but the heart of the matter was that without "the elevation and enlightenment of the proletariat" nothing really could be achieved. Sri Aurobindo therefore urged that only a mass awakening — an organisation of the entire power of the country — could redeem the time, cause discomfiture to the alien rulers and usher in national independence.

While charging the generality of British officials in India with rudeness and arrogance and meanness, while describing their conduct as that of "a small coterie of masters surrounded by a nation of helots", Sri Aurobindo nevertheless exhorted his countrymen, neither to nurse hatred for the foreigner nor merely cringe before him, but rather to seek strength and the clue to salvation within:

Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism.... If we were not dazzled by the artificial glare of English prestige, we should at once acknowledge that these men are not worth being angry with.... Our appeal, the appeal of

every high-souled and self-respecting nation, ought not to lie to the opinion of the Anglo-Indians, no, nor yet to the British sense of justice, but to our own reviving sense of manhood, to our own sincere fellow-feeling... with the silent and suffering people of India.

In another place, Sri Aurobindo remarked that the Indian patriot had more to learn from the French republican experiment (or even the Athenian) than from the British:

...if we cast our glance across the English channel, we shall witness a very different and more animating spectacle. Gifted with a lighter, subtler, and cleaner mind than their insular neighbours, the French people have moved irresistibly towards a social and not a political development.

Sri Aurobindo then showed that if, like the British, we had laid the foundations of social collapse, we had also, like the French, learned to enact the drama of political incompetence. Our national effort, then, "must contract a social and popular tendency before it can hope to be great and fruitful".

The first two articles in the series³⁰, with their white-hot brilliance and uncompromising hammer-blows, caused dismay and indignation in Congress circles, and Mahadev Govind Ranade warned the proprietor of the *Indu Prakash* that, should the series continue in the same strain, he would be prosecuted for sedition. As requested by the proprietor, the original plan was aban-

³⁰ "This title ('New Lamps for Old') . . . is not used in the sense of the Aladdin story, but was intended to imply the offering of new lights to replace the old and faint reformist lights of the Congress" (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p.27).

doned, but at K. G. Deshpande's instance the series was continued on a much more subdued key, the articles appeared at long intervals, and then ceased altogether. As Ranade was rather anxious to meet the writer of the sensational articles, Sri Aurobindo had an interview at Bombay for half an hour when the veteran leader tried to persuade the firebrand to turn to some less incendiary, but more constructive, cause like jail reform!

Sri Aurobindo's 11 articles in the 'New Lamps for Old' series (only 9 are now traceable) and the 7 (also anonymous) that followed, from the issue of 16 July to that of 27 August 1894, on the personality and achievement of Bankim Chandra are the earliest exhibits that we have of Sri Aurobindo's English prose style. Excepting in their boldness of thought and energy of expression, they do not betray the age of the author (he was barely 22 then). Already we notice in them the sinuosity and balance, the imagery and colour, the trenchancy and sarcasm, that were to distinguish Sri Aurobindo's later and maturer writings. He argues with cogency and subtlety; he describes with picturesqueness and particularity; and he denounces, if denounce he must, with pitiless deadly accuracy. This about the 'civilians' of almost a century ago:

A shallow schoolboy stepping from a cramming establishment to the command of high and difficult affairs can hardly be expected to give us anything magnificent or princely. Still less can it be expected when the sons of small tradesmen are suddenly promoted from the counter to govern great provinces... Bad in training, void of culture, in instruction poor, it (education in England) is in plain truth a sort of education that leaves him with all

his imperfections on his head, unmannerly, uncultivated, unintelligent.

In his speech before the Baroda College Union referred to on an earlier page, Sri Aurobindo had painted the bright side of British education — and here we have the antithesis! Sri Aurobindo is speaking, not of the finest flowers of British education, but of the humdrum or worse than humdrum that found a way to India. “They are really ordinary men”, said Sri Aurobindo, “and not only ordinary men but ordinary Englishmen — types of the middle-class or Philistines... with the narrow hearts and commercial habit of mind peculiar to that sort of people”. Nor is the Anglicised Babu spared in the least: he is the man of endless perorations in the Congress, he “frolics in the abysmal fatuity” of interpellations on the floor of the Legislative Council, and he ekes out his “scanty wardrobe with the cast-off rags and thread-bare leavings” of his English masters. The educational system in India was “the most ingeniously complete machine for murder that human stupidity ever invented, and murder not only of a man’s body but of a man’s soul”. Of a certain Mr. Munro (alas, oblivion has all but swallowed him up, but in his day he seems to have done some injury to Bankim Chandra), all that is said is that he “had the temper of a badly educated hyena!” As for Bankim himself, here is Sri Aurobindo’s splendid summing-up:

And when Posterity comes to crown with her praises the Makers of India, she will place her most splendid laurel, not on the sweating temples of a place-hunting politician nor on the narrow forehead of a noisy social reformer, but on the serene brow of that gracious Bengali (Bankim) who never cla-

moured for place or power, but did his work in silence for love of his work, even as nature does, and, just because he had no other aim but to give out the best that was in him, was able to create a language, a literature and a nation.³¹

There is no need to multiply quotations: these early prose compositions are so striking in their force of individuality that they invite attention and appreciation, even as his 'juvenile' poems do — because their author was Sri Aurobindo.

The necessity to tone down the 'New Lamps for Old' articles in the *Indu Prakash* to the point of pointlessness, doling out doses of the philosophy of politics instead of outlining the rites of sacrificial purification by blood and fire, made Sri Aurobindo withdraw into a shell for the time being, hoping for a more favourable opportunity for the exposition of revolutionary theory and its translation into practice. He looked about him, and he could see that the times were not propitious. In a poem he wrote soon after, *Lines on Ireland: 1896*, under cover of describing the abasement and agony of Ireland after Parnell's fall and death and the defeat at the 1895 polls of Gladstone's move to grant Home Rule, Sri Aurobindo managed — by sleight of hand — to picture the Indian predicament too, the flight of idealism, the hugging of slavery, the loss of self-respect, the reign of sloth, the peace of the grave. The subject is Ireland, but by poetic implication or *dhwani*, we are made to think of India more than of Ireland:

O mutability of human merit!

How changed, how fallen from her ancient spirit!

She that was Ireland, Ireland now no more,

³¹ *Bankim Chandra Chatterji*, p. 50.

In beggar's weeds behold at England's door...
 Yet thine own self a little understand,
 Unhappy country, and be wise at length.
 An outward weakness doing deeds of strength
 Amazed the nations, but a power within
 Directed, like effective spirit unseen
 Behind the mask of trivial forms, a source
 And fund of tranquil and collected force...
 But thou to thine own self disloyal, hast
 Renounced the help divine turning thy past
 To idle legends...
 Therefore effective wisdom, skill to bend
 All human things to one predestined end
 Renounce thee....³²

Instead of a god-anointed leader, the nation has a "self-appointed crew" —

...for seldom men refuse

Credence, when mediocrity multiplied

Equals itself with genius —

that is courageous enough to effect the "country's ruin"¹
 But this couldn't last long, for although for a little while
 the gods might permit these little men to thrive in their
 pride, the time must come when they would be sent
 packing to the "loud limbo of futilities". The poem was
 evidently an attempt on Sri Aurobindo's part to achieve
 a katharsis of the temporary feeling of frustration that
 may have grated upon his consciousness.

V

It was alas only too true that several of the Indians

³² *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, pp. 12-3.

who were (in the expressive phrase) "England returned" — often, indeed, "returned with thanks" — tried absurdly to assume the god, affect a superior nod, and seemed to shake the spheres of indigenous life and culture. Sri Aurobindo was different; a stay of fourteen years in England had enabled him, not only to observe the variegated lineaments of European culture, but also to see *through* them and discriminate between what was good and what was evil. Returning to India, he found to his chagrin that the so-called "educated" classes were desperately trying to ape the foreigner in almost everything. Our educational machinery, our ruling ideas, our imported models, all were shoddy in appearance and poisonous in their effects. As he wrote many years later in an article entitled 'The Awakening Soul in India':

The nineteenth century in India was imitative, self-forgetful, artificial. It aimed at a successful reproduction of Europe in India, forgetting the deep saying of the Gita, "Better the law of one's own being though it be badly done than an alien *dharma* well-followed; death in one's own *dharma* is better, it is a dangerous thing to follow the law of another's nature". For death in one's own *dharma* brings new birth, success in an alien path means only successful suicide³³

And yet, miraculously, India did not die a spiritual death; that tragedy, "enacted more than once in history", was somehow barely — though only barely — averted in the case of India. And the reasons are not far to seek. The Indian countryside had all along remained inveterately Indian; and men like Ramalinga Swami, Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Ramakrishna, Mahadev

³³ *The Ideal of the Karmayogin* (1950), p. 25.

Govind Ranade and others were able, in varying degrees, to stem the tide of denationalisation and assert the claims of the Indian genius to live its own life and win its own spiritual laurels even in our blatantly materialistic age. Here was the "irrational" phenomenon that saved India! The Paramahansa himself but lived "what many would call the life of a mad man, a man without intellectual training, a man without any outward sign of culture or civilisation, a man who lived on the alms of others, such a man as the English-educated Indian would ordinarily talk of as one useless to society...." What could such a man know that is relevant to the modern world of science and technology and representative democracy? What had such a mere *sadhu* to offer to the young men steeped in the latest knowledge of the West? But there's a Divinity that shapes our ends still:

God knew what he was doing. He sent that man to Bengal and set him in the temple of Dakshineshwar in Calcutta, and from North and South, and East and West, the educated men, men who were the pride of the university, who had studied all that Europe can teach, came to fall at the feet of this ascetic. The work of salvation, the work of raising India was begun.³⁴

Within a few years of his return, then, Sri Aurobindo saw very clearly that salvation could come to India, then fallen upon evil days, not through dialectical skill and intellectual subtlety, but through renewed faith and stern spiritual discipline; not by a brazen mimicry of Western models and Western mores, but rather by recapturing, amplifying and re-living the eternal truths of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita:

³⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, p. 11.

Yet thine own self a little understand,

Unhappy country, and be wise at length.

On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo was no mere revivalist, or obscurantist, or parrotist of outworn formulas. As he wrote later in the course of a letter to Dilip Kumar Roy, "The traditions of the past are very great in their own place — in the past. But that is no reason why we should go on repeating the past. In the evolution of a spiritual consciousness upon earth, a great past ought to be followed by a greater future".

In his own life and in the life of the nation, what Sri Aurobindo wanted, what he set out to achieve, was a veritable transformation — not a retreat to the past, not a return to obsolete forms, but a rediscovery of the soul and rebuilding around it of a life full of vigour and vitality, and in consonance with the imperatives of the present and also ready to meet the challenges of the future. All that divided him and divided the people from the Mother — "Glory of moonlight dreams!" — all that fed the virus of alienation, all that emasculated or maimed Indian humanity: all that had to be ruthlessly attacked at the source, and rooted out or chased away. In short, individual and nation alike had deliberately to will and achieve the difficult feat of re-nationalisation. For him, it did not simply mean acquiring a knowledge of Bengali, Gujarati or Marathi, or delving into the treasures of Sanskrit literature; or showing a preference for Indian dress or Indian dishes. For the nation too, the change required was something far deeper than a shuffling of the externals or a pathetic exhumation of all our dead yesterdays. The problem rather was, alike for the individual and for the race, to get at the *living* past and structure on its sure foundations alone the present and the future.

VI

As the days, months and years passed, as Sri Aurobindo became more and more a witness spirit beyonding his normal activities of eating, sleeping and waking up, of teaching, reading and writing, as he saw the total Indian situation steadily and searchingly, from out of the confusions and irrelevances and side-tracking occupations of the hour, two things seemed to emerge with shining clarity: first, the paramount necessity for Revolution to redeem the Mother, Mother India; and second (though this was not at once apparent), the indispensability of Yoga to perfect the human instrument that is to plan the revolution, give it a push at the right time, and see it safely through.

Decades earlier, Sri Aurobindo's grandfather, Rajnaram Bose, had organised a secret society (enrolling young Rabindranath Tagore himself as a member) and also established an institution for revolutionary propaganda and action, but the climate of the time being what it was, neither the secret society nor the institution could prove effective. Knowing the fate of his grandfather's pioneering revolutionary effort and the fate, too, of the abortive Cambridge secret society, the "Lotus and Dagger", Sri Aurobindo wasn't eager to take another leap in the dark. His first visits to Bengal after his return to India helped him to gauge the temper of the people, and he also came into contact with certain individuals, certain ideas, certain trends, that were working, however obscurely, however tardily, for the liberation of the country from the nightmare death-in-life of alien bureaucratic rule. Towards the close of the century (1898 or 1899), when Jatindranath Banerjee (later known as Niralamb Swami) came to Baroda,

Sri Aurobindo got him admitted into the State Army with the help of the Jadhavs, and it had to be given out that Jatin was not a dangerous Bengali but a harmless man from North India. When he had received adequate military training, Jatin was sent by Sri Aurobindo to Bengal with a clear-cut programme of revolutionary work. Jatin soon managed to establish contact with Barrister P. Mitter, Bibhuti Bhushan Bhattacharya and Mrs. Sarala Ghoshal, who had already started some revolutionary work (ostensibly on the plea that the groups of young men were learning lathi play) on the inspiration of Baron Okakura. Sri Aurobindo himself came to Bengal in 1900 or a little later and met these revolutionaries on Jatin's initiative. It seemed to Sri Aurobindo that, whereas he was for an open armed revolution in the whole of India, "what they did at the time was something very childish — things like beating magistrates and so on. Later on it turned into terrorism and dacoities, which were not at all my (Sri Aurobindo's) idea or intention".³⁵ His own idea was "a programme of preparation and action which he thought might occupy a period of 30 years before fruition could become possible".³⁶ Returning to Baroda, Sri Aurobindo met Mr. Mandavale, a member of a Secret Society in Western India which had as its directing chief a Thakur of the Udaipur State, and took the oath of the Revolutionary Party. This meant Sri Aurobindo making a special journey into Central India to try to win over Indian sub-officers and men in certain regiments to the revolutionary cause.³⁷

³⁵ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 58.

³⁶ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 41.

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

Presently Barindra, who had already tried without success one or two occupations, joined his brother at Baroda and became fully infected with the revolutionary fever. In 1902, Sri Aurobindo went to Midnapore accompanied by Jatin and Barin, and there was some practice of rifle shooting on the lands of Hemachandra Das. It was about this time that Sri Aurobindo decided to establish six centres of revolutionary work in Bengal, and gave the oath of the Revolutionary Party to P. Mitter and Hemachandra Das. Holding a sword and the Gita in their hands, they took the oath to strive to secure at any cost the freedom of Mother India. Sri Aurobindo thus became the secret link between the revolutionary groups in Western and Eastern India. By and by the revolutionary spirit spread in Bengal, especially in the villages and among the common people of whom Sri Aurobindo had written in one of the 'New Lamps for Old' articles of 1893. "The proletariat among us is sunk in ignorance and overwhelmed with distress" The darkness was lifting at last, the stupor was ending. Barin too had found his vocation, and he was now able to translate into action the ideas and programmes of Sri Aurobindo:

Barindra's work in Bengal was the organisation in the villages—even the most remote—of a chain of Samitis, or youth organisations, which would meet under all kinds of pretexts, but with the real aim of providing a civic and political education and opening the eyes of the young to the "affairs of the nation".... In smoky little grain shops, on the terraced roofs of private houses, young men would meet to hear about the lives of Mazzini and Garibaldi, to read exhortations from

Swami Vivekananda, to listen to the warlike incidents of the *Mahabharata* and to comments on the Bhagavad Gita. The number of Samitis increased daily.³⁸

In Maharashtra, under Lokamanya Tilak's unparalleled leadership, political education came to be imparted during the Ganapati Festivals that attracted old and young alike. In course of time, this breeze of revolutionary fervour blew almost all over the subcontinent. One particular feature of the movement was that several of the leaders were either Yogis themselves or disciples of Yogis — at least they were men endowed with great strength of character. Men like P. Mitter and Manoranjan Guha-Thakurtha were disciples of the famous Yogi Bejoy Goswami. It was as though the soul of the race had awakened and was throwing up such fine personalities.³⁹

In 1902, Sister Nivedita — Vivekananda's great disciple — came to Baroda, and Sri Aurobindo along with Khasirao Jadhav received her at the station. When she had an interview with the Maharaja, Sri Aurobindo was present. When she urged that the Maharaja should support the secret revolution, he hedged — said he would send word through Sri Aurobindo, which of course he never did; "Sayajirao was much too cunning to plunge into such a dangerous business".⁴⁰ Nivedita saw in Sri Aurobindo the divinely ordained successor to the revolutionary side of her great Guru, Swami Vivekananda; Sri Aurobindo, on his part, had admired her distantly as the author of *Kali the Mother*, and now found in her a fiery spirit utterly consecrated to the cause of the libe-

³⁸ Lizelle Raymond, *The Dedicated* (1953), pp 283-4.

³⁹ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 46.

⁴⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 97.

ration of Mother India from despotic foreign rule. They discussed neither spiritual questions nor Ramakrishna or Vivekananda; they saw themselves as fellow-votaries of Kali the Mother, as children of Bhavani Bharati, and this was the adamant basis of their collaboration on the political field.

After a period of close cooperation, differences — personal as well as organisational — arose between Jatin and Barin at Calcutta. For a time Jatin had worked among lawyers, doctors and other professional men, while Barin and Abinash Bhattacharya had fished for recruits for revolution among the students. Jatin was thought by some of his comrades to be too much of a military marionette, and Barin, Abinash and Hemachandra were all allergic to that kind of mechanical discipline. Sri Aurobindo found it necessary, on learning how matters stood, to visit Calcutta in the early months of 1903 and try to heal the breach to the extent possible. This he did, firstly by patiently listening to both points of view, and then by setting up a supreme controlling committee of five consisting of Barrister P Mitter, Chittaranjan Das, Sister Nivedita, Jatin himself and Surendranath Tagore, to be in overall charge of revolutionary work in Bengal. Although this committee was not conspicuously successful in its work of coordination, the movement itself spread — presently fanned to a furious blaze by the legislature passing the Act that partitioned Bengal — to a phenomenal extent, and for this growing body of young men and dedicated workers Sri Aurobindo became the supreme (if absentee) leader of the coming revolution. As for Sri Aurobindo himself, he knew he couldn't come out into the open so long as he was in service, but he knew too that, when the preor-

dained hour struck, he wouldn't hesitate to cut his connection with the Baroda College and plunge openly into the political fray.

When he was first advised by Keshavrao Deshpande to take to Yoga, Sri Aurobindo (as mentioned earlier) had declined, viewing Yoga as a mere retreat from life. Spiritual experiences like the vast calm that descended upon him when he set foot on Apollo Bunder — and on later occasions too (for example an effort of will seeming to materialise as a Being of Light and preventing a carriage accident in Baroda in 1901)⁴¹ — were a different matter, and had nothing to do with Yogic sadhana as such. It was some years after his return to India that he started certain practices on his own, just getting the rule from an Engineer friend, Mr. Devadhar, who was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda of Ganga Math, Chandod, on the banks of the Narmada; this was, however, confined for the time being to sustained *prāṇāyāma*, for three hours in the morning and two in the evening. The immediate effect was a marvellous mental illumination, *prakāśmaya*; from this resulted an unprecedented flow of poetry, for whereas he could hardly write ten lines of poetry before in the course of a day, now as many as 200 seemed to come as in a flood in less than an hour. His health improved too, his memory became sharp, the brain seemed to race with a new energy and a clearer sense of direction, and Sri Aurobindo had besides the experience of certain unusual psycho-physical phenomena. In 1903, Sri Aurobindo had *darśan* of Swami Brahmananda at his ashram, and found the spiritual contact momentarily overpowering. On this occasion Sri Aurobindo also visited one of the temples of Kali in the neighbour-

⁴¹ Purani, *Life*, p. 71.

hood, and what he saw was not just an image but a Presence, even as he had an experience of the vacant Infinite when walking on the ridge of the Takht-i-Sulemani in Kashmir during the same year. It is to these two singular experiences that Sri Aurobindo refers in the following passage in one of his letters:

A philosophic statement about the Atman is a mental formula, not knowledge, not experience; yet sometimes the Divine takes it as a channel of touch; strangely, a barrier in the mind breaks down, something is seen, a profound change operated in some inner part, there enters into the ground of the nature something calm, equal, ineffable.

One stands upon a mountain ridge and glimpses or mentally feels a wideness, a pervasiveness, a nameless Vast in Nature; then suddenly there comes the touch, a revelation, a flooding, the mental loses itself in the spiritual, one bears the first invasion of the Infinite.

Or you stand before a temple of Kali behind a sacred river and see what? — a sculpture, a gracious piece of architecture, but in a moment mysteriously, unexpectedly there is instead a Presence, a Power, a Face that looks into yours, an inner sight in you has regarded the World-Mother.⁴²

Next year, Barin came to Baroda, after wandering in the Amarkantak in the Vindhya mountains, with a malignant fever which proved unresponsive to medical treatment. A Naga sannyasi arrived just then, and on coming to know of Barin's predicament, asked for a cup of water and cut it crosswise with a knife while repeating a mantra. Barin was given the water to drink, and was promptly cured

⁴² *On Yoga II*, Tome One, p. 216.

of the fever. It was probably this Naga sannyasi who gave Sri Aurobindo the stotra of Kali with the powerful refrain *Jahi Jahi*, conducted certain *kriyās* and even a Vedic *yajña* with a view to promoting success in his political mission.⁴³

But all this was merely preparatory. Sri Aurobindo realised that he was being more and more irresistibly drawn to the path of Yoga. But he had no Guru yet, for although he had had *darśan* of Brahmananda and received blessings from him, it was to a saintly man he had gone, not to an accepted Guru. The ground of course was already prepared, and contacts like those with Brahmananda and the Naga sannyasi helped to plant the seed of faith whose potentialities were immense. Was it not a priceless gain in itself that Sri Aurobindo had realised — like Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* — that "Thought without reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous?" The Beast of Intellectualism was now contained within its proper sphere, and Sri Aurobindo could therefore soar unhampered into the illimitable above-mind regions; his spiritual fire-baptism had thus commenced at last in real earnest. "It is a wonderful phenomenon", writes Swami Nikhilananda, "that the consummation of our spiritual life is reached only when the student comes in contact with the teacher".⁴⁴ Even though Sri Aurobindo had not yet found a Guru, already he felt powerfully drawn to the path of Yoga; he poised himself on its razor-edged precariousness and perilousness — he pushed forward confidently — although he could not glimpse with any certitude his precise destination!

⁴³ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp 35-6.

⁴⁴ *Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1942, p. 127.

VII

It was in April 1901 that Sri Aurobindo, then 28, took an important step in his life; he married Mrinalni Bose, who was barely half his age (she was born on 6 March 1888). He had no doubt had several offers, but he seems to have also inserted an advertisement for a bride; and he finally selected Mrinalni, daughter of Bhupal Chandra Bose of Jessore, who had settled down at Ranchi. The marriage took place in Calcutta according to Hindu rites. When it was suggested that he should shave his head and undergo purificatory rites for having crossed the seas and lived in England, Sri Aurobindo firmly refused, and the matter was conveniently smoothed over by the obliging brahmin priest who did some *parihāra* or neutralisation for a monetary consideration. Among those who attended the marriage were Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose the scientist and Lady Bose.

After marriage the couple went to Deoghar, and from there to Naini Tal, his sister Sarojini also accompanying them; they reached Naini Tal on 29 May and remained for a month amidst those utterly beautiful and gorgeous Kumaon range of hills, with the Himalayas looming immense behind. The Maharaja of Baroda was at Naini Tal too, but left for Baroda earlier. By the beginning of July, Sri Aurobindo returned to Baroda with his wife and sister, and Barin also soon joined them.

It is difficult, almost impossible, to reconstruct the story of Sri Aurobindo's marriage and married life. The scanty external facts that we happen to know do not seem to tell the whole story: they even give a confused, or perversely blurred, picture. Mrinalini came to Sri Aurobindo as a beautiful girl, steeped in the Hindu tradi-

tion of unswerving wifely devotion to one's husband and willing and eager to play her appointed role. After three or four years, they seem to have somewhat drifted apart, yet owing to no fault of either. Perhaps in was the 'generation gap' that was responsible; more probably still, it was due to the conflict of their respective preoccupations. Sri Aurobindo, as we have seen in the earlier pages, was getting entangled, deeper and deeper, in the meshes of politics, especially the organisation of secret revolutionary activity, and he was also feeling drawn towards Yoga. Mrinalini, on the other hand, was still no more than a girl, she had been used to the ordinary comforts and sense of security in a middle-class Bengali home, she was no diamond-edged intellectual, and no god-intoxicated *bhakta* either; and notwithstanding the reassuring presence of Sarojini most of the time, Mrinalini very likely found her admired and adored husband rather difficult to understand. When Sri Aurobindo took the plunge into politics after 1906, gave up the security of the Baroda job, and invited the rigours of privation, persecution and incarceration, Mrinalini's unease only deepened all the more. For a girl, it is always a cross between glory and penance to marry a man of genius; and Sri Aurobindo was more than a man of genius. He was afflicted with Divine madnnesses; he was verily a descended god! But a god is to be worshipped from a distance, not viewed from close quarters; and Mrinalini often felt ill at ease. Both at Baroda and later at Calcutta, she tried with Sarojini's assistance to hold the home-front with a brave face. Sometimes, for a change, she lived with her parents. Long letters passed between husband and wife, and some of these letters are now among the classics of Bengali epistolary art. Mrinalini thus wandered between two worlds, and she wasn't

quite at home in either; and she didn't know where and how and when she could find her peace. She was "destined to suffer for marrying a genius", writes R. R. Diwakar; "she had rarely the privilege of living with her husband for long, though their relations were most cordial and full of affection from the beginning to the end.... She was a high-souled woman of great devotion and piety, and by her dignity made suffering itself a step towards a higher life".⁴⁵

During the brief period of Sri Aurobindo's hectic political life, his wife and sister were even more often left alone than at Baroda, and the year following the Muzzaferpore outrage — the long months of trial and prison-life at Alipur — must have proved particularly excruciating. When Sri Aurobindo left, in the early months of 1910, first for Chandernagore and from there for Pondicherry, the distance (psychological more than physical) between husband and wife seemed to be greater and more unbridgeable than ever. Her cousin, Saurin Bose, came to Pondicherry soon after Sri Aurobindo's arrival, but saw that things were not as yet propitious for Mrinalini joining her husband. The separation continued through the war years, and it has been recorded on the testimony of her brother, Dr. Sisir Kumar Bose, a medical practitioner at Ranchi, that "she always bore the separation well and with satisfaction, as she realised that, although she was high in the estimation of her husband, she would not be helping him in his way of life by insisting on his continuous company".⁴⁶ On coming to know that she had received spiritual solace and initiation from Sarada Devi (of Dakshineshwar), Sri Aurobindo felt glad that

⁴⁵ *Mahayogi* (1954 Edition), p. 50.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p. 50.

his wife "had found so great a spiritual refuge".⁴⁷ He also intimated to her that she might join him at Pondicherry, but just when, after the war, she was preparing to make the journey to the South, she succumbed to a severe attack of influenza in December 1918. In the life-history of Sri Aurobindo, Mrinalini Devi seems but to play a minor role: but so does Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, in the *Ramayana*. They also serve who suffer in silence and with their silence contribute to the unfoldment of the Divine play.

⁴⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p 94.

CHAPTER FOUR

TRANSLATIONS

I

During the Baroda period, Sri Aurobindo engaged in a great deal of literary activity, in prose and in verse, in journalistic as also serious creative writing. Journalism embalmed years after its publication in the form of a book could be utterly unreadable. But Sri Aurobindo's contemporary political comment like 'New Lamps for Old' and first forays in literary criticism like the series of articles on Bankim still leap to life as one reads them, and both have been republished in book form.¹ Some other political writing of the last years of the Baroda period — notably the 'Bhavani Mandir' scheme which the Government of the time thought was a veritable piece of political dynamite — will be more appropriately discussed in a later Section of the book. In this and the three subsequent chapters, we shall consider Sri Aurobindo's English poetical compositions of the Baroda period — translations, narrative poetry, dramatic poetry, and other poetry both sacred and secular.

The return to India, the renewed contact (after the suspension of fourteen years) with Indian people and Indian culture, seems to have released in Sri Aurobindo a hidden spring of literary activity, and the flow of verse — whether as translation or as original creation — seems

¹ 'New Lamps for Old' is included in *Sri Aurobindo's Political Thought* 1893-1908, edited by Haridas and Uma Mukherjee (1958), pp. 61-123, and the other series is reprinted as *Bankim Chandra Chatterji* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1954)

to have continued uninterrupted year after year; and even his political or yogic preoccupations during the latter part of his Baroda stay did not affect this activity, and sometimes indeed actually gave it a fresh momentum and force of utterance. We saw in the last chapter how one result of the practice of *pranayama* was a greatly increased speed of poetic composition, often some 200 lines in less than an hour. So too we shall find him, in the thick of the political period, essaying powerful verse narratives like *Baji Prabhou* and *Vidula* or adventuring into the realm of poetic drama in *Perseus the Deliverer*.

Although Sri Aurobindo's first acquaintance and his growing intimacy with Bengali and Sanskrit literature opened a rich vein of poetic interest and inspiration resulting in a burst of activity comprising translations, adaptations, imitations, transmutations and also original creations, yet only very little of this immense body of work was actually published during the Baroda period — a few pieces in *Songs to Myrtilla* (1895), some of Bhartrihari's 'The Century of Life' in the *Baroda College Magazine* and the early narrative poem *Urvashi* (1896). During Sri Aurobindo's editorship of the *Bande Mataram* and later of the *Karmayogin*, some of his poems including *Baji Prabhou* and translations like *Vidula* (from the *Mahabharata*) and his original play *Perseus the Deliverer* appeared in those papers or in the *Modern Review*. *Songs of the Sea*, Sri Aurobindo's translation of C. R. Das's *Sagar-Sangit*, was published only in 1923 and hence does not strictly belong to the Baroda period, but it is conveniently discussed in this chapter along with the other translations from Bengali and Sanskrit. Another early narrative poem, *Love and Death*, was first published only in 1921, and some of the early lyrics were

included in *Ahana and Other Poems* and issued in 1915.

Apart from the above, Sri Aurobindo translated a large quantity of Bengali and Sanskrit poetry and also wrote numerous original poems and plays, but left most of it as drafts (often two or more drafts of the same work, or of particular passages or stanzas), some in a complete and some in a fragmentary form. The play *Vasavadutta*, for example, was in several versions, the last being dated 1916, but the play was certainly begun in the Baroda period, like *The Hero and the Nymph*, Sri Aurobindo's blank verse translation of Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie*. Many of Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts were seized during the Alipur trial (1908-9), and some of it—especially his translation of the *Meghaduta* in terza rima—is apparently lost for ever. But some (like the manuscript of the play, *The Viziers of Bassora*) lay forgotten in a trunk consigned to the limbo of the record room of a Court, and was spotted out, decades later, when it was about to be disposed of as waste paper to the Government contractor. Much of this unpublished material going back even to the early years of the Baroda period has been sorted out, deciphered, edited and given to the world posthumously, and our gratitude is not a little due to the scholarly editors who have brought so much devotion and critical ingenuity and discrimination to their task. The corpus of this literature belonging to the Baroda period, even though not all of it may have yet achieved publication, is still of formidable bulk. We can here no more than glance at it, now from this side now from that, and try to form some impression of its richness and variety. In this chapter, however, we shall confine ourselves to the translations: from

old Greek poetry, from mediaeval and modern Bengali poetry, from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, from Bhartrihari, and lastly from Kalidasa.²

In the matter of translations, Sri Aurobindo seems to have held the not unreasonable, if perhaps unorthodox, view that mere literalness or word for word equation was not the ideal to be aimed at, and in fact he once wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy: "a translator is not necessarily bound to the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is very often done".³ But it should be equally clear that, if 'literalness' should not mean dullness, flatness or deadness ("turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness"), equally 'freedom' should not mean a sheerly tangential escape into regions altogether new. A literary (literary not literal) translation is no students' crib, but neither should it involve a Bottom-like transmogrification! Good translations like Dryden's Virgil and Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam are equally poems by virtue of their finish and their essential fidelity to their originals.⁴ Sri Aurobindo's letters contain other perceptive remarks too, as for example:

There are two ways of rendering a poem from one language into another — one is to keep strictly to the manner and turn of the original, the other to take its spirit, sense and imagery and reproduce

² The reader is also referred to R. Bangaruswami's essay on 'Sri Aurobindo's Translations' in *Mother India*, September 1952, pp. 36-41, and October 1952, pp. 33-40.

³ *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series (On Poetry and Literature), 1949, p. 208.

⁴ Cf. George Sampson: "Dryden's Virgil is literally Dryden's Virgil...Its readers were already familiar with Virgil's Virgil, and wanted to know how a great English poet would treat that familiar story."

them freely so as to suit the new language....

The proper rule about literalness in translation... is that one should keep as close as possible to the original provided the result does not read like a translation but like an original poem in Bengali, and, as far as possible, as if it were the original poem originally written in Bengali....

I do not think it is the ideas that make the distinction between European and Indian tongues — it is the turn of the language.... Naturally, one should not go too far away from the original and say something quite different in substance but, subject to this limitation, any necessary freedom is quite admissible.⁵

There are two ways — neither way is better — both ways have their dangers and attractions — and the translator's own sense of measure (or *matra*) should guide him. Poetry is often turned to prose in translation; that was how Lang translated Homer into English. Likewise, can prose in one language be turned into verse in another? Yes, says Sri Aurobindo, but only in very special cases:

I think it is quite legitimate to translate poetic prose into poetry; I have done it myself when I translated *The Hero and the Nymph* on the ground that the beauty of Kalidasa's prose is best rendered by poetry in English, or at least that I found myself best able to render it in that way.⁶

But just as it is next to impossible to put poetry into prose in the same language (if it could be done, why poetry at all in the first instance?), it is even more an

⁵ *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, pp. 207-210.

⁶ *ibid*, pp 211-2.

exercise in despair to try to render poetry into verse or prose in another language. Ideas can be transplanted from language to language (even this is not always easy), but poetry is the idea touched with the magic of phrase and incantatory music. There are no exact equivalents to heavily emotion-charged or myth-laden words, and hence absolute accuracy must be out of question when translating even from one contemporary language into another. And when it is a question of turning classical Greek or Latin or Sanskrit into modern English, the difficulties are bound to be greater still. Words like men have histories of their own; and the climate of an age conditions the nuances of meaning hovering round particular words or verbal concepts. This may call for a romantic or poetic approach to the problem, for not otherwise will the translator be able to wrest the intended old meaning and present it in a new guise.

II

In his Cambridge days and immediately afterwards, Sri Aurobindo often experimented in literary translation and turned passages or pieces from Latin or Greek into English. *Hecuba* from the Greek was liked by Laurence Binyon, who thought that it revealed a poetic talent that deserved to be cultivated. *A Rose of Women* from Meleager is included in *Songs to Myrtilla*:

Now lilies blow upon the windy height,
Now flowers the pansy kissed by tender rain,
Narcissus builds his house of self-delight
And love's own fairest flower blooms again;
Vainly your gems, O meadows, you recall;

narrative or dramatic, into English verse. The mediaeval lyrics of Vidyapati, Chandidas and others were an immediate irresistible temptation. In this rich vein of poetry, the divine and human aspects are so tantalisingly jumbled together that, at one and the same time, a lyric may be read both as sensuous erotic poetry and as the true mystical sublime of the poetry of devotion. The bhakti movement in Bengal was doubtless a part of a nation-wide movement, yet it had its distinctive local characteristics as well. Many years later, Sri Aurobindo brilliantly defined as follows the unique quality of this poetry:

The desire of the soul for God is there (in Bengali Vaishnava poetry) thrown into symbolic figure in the lyrical love cycle of Radha and Krishna, the Nature soul in man seeking for the Divine Soul through love, seized and mastered by his beauty, attracted by his magical flute, abandoning human cares and duties for this one overpowering passion and in the cadence of its phases passing through first desire to the bliss of union, the pangs of separation, the eternal longing and reunion, the *lila* of the love of the human spirit for God.... This accomplished lyrical form springs at once to perfect birth from the genius of... Vidyapati, a consummate artist of word and line, and the inspired singer Chandidas in whose name stand some of the sweetest and most poignant love-lyrics in any tongue.¹¹

¹¹ *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (1953), p. 359. In his earlier drafts and publications of the Baroda period, Sri Aurobindo spelt Indian proper names in their Bengali way of pronunciation Yudhishtere, Arjoon, Cowshalya, Dussaruth, Himaloy, Menoca, etc., but I have usually given the current spelling so as not to cause undue puzzlement to the readers.

Two of Sri Aurobindo's renderings from Chandidas are included in *Songs to Myrtilla* and one more in a later collection. These three, along with selections from Nidhu Babu, Horu Thakur and Jnanadas (in all 37 pieces) came out in 1956, with the Bengali text facing the English version. Likewise forty-one of Vidyapati's songs also came out in the same year. It is clear, however, that many of these renderings are "amplified transmutations" rather than close translations, and it was probably with these particularly in mind that Sri Aurobindo once confessed with his usual disarming good humour:

I admit that I have not practised what I preached, — whenever I translated I was careless of the hurt feelings of the original text and transmogrified it without mercy into whatever my fancy chose. But that is a high and mighty criminality which one ought not to imitate. Latterly I have tried to be more moral in my ways, I don't know with what success.¹²

The best thing therefore would be to look upon these renderings from old Bengali poetry as merely flowing from the inspiration of the originals, though not austere controlled by them. The renderings are the effusion of an exuberant youthful sensibility that for the first time felt the power and fascination of a rich native poetic tradition. The primary inspiration may have been Chandidas or Vidyapati, but what matters to us is that the lyrics have the authentic swing and taste of poetry:

O heart, my heart, merry thy sweet youth ran
In fields where no love was; thy breath

¹² *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series, p. 209.

Is anguish, since his cruel reign began.

What other cure but death?¹³

It is Love's eternal faltering-unfaltering language; it is as old as, or older than, the hills and the sea and the sky; but it is not less poetic for being so primordial. What has poetry to do with terribly "new" things like the electric dynamo, the four-track recorder or the latest vacuum cleaner? Man, God and Nature are alone the primal stuff of poetry, and that is why we cannot help immediately responding to a stanza like:

Therefore to this sweet sanctuary I brought

My chilled and shuddering thought.

Ah, suffer, sweet,

To thy most faultless feet

That I should cling unchid; ah, spurn me not!¹⁴

In yet another poem, *Karma*, a pretty conceit is quickened with emotion; since Krishna will not come to Radha, she will now leap into the ocean and die —

Die and be born to life again

As Nanda's son, the joy of Braja's girls,

And I will make thee Radha then. .

Then I will love thee and then leave .

Then shalt thou know the bitterness of love.¹⁵

Vidyapati is often uninhibitedly sensuous, scattering references to the wealth of woman's physical charms: her breasts are first plums of light, then golden oranges, then pomegranate seed-cities, and finally they are fruits-of-opulence twin. In poem after poem, woman's beauty — the theme and haven of love — is described with a conscious display of elaboration that silences comment:

Thy tendrilled down's a snake, to drink cool winds

¹³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 29.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p 30 ¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 132.

That from thy harbouring navel stirred,
 But by the fancied bill of emperor bird
 Cowed to thy breast's hill-cavern winds.¹⁶

Such poetry may be sensuous but it is not really sensual, this sense of love-play between young cowherdesses and the dark-hued boyish Krishna is more a pastoral — or even proletarian — version of divine love than an exercise in eroticism, and although the imagery is often bold, often audacious, often even outlandish, there is seldom any suggestion of mere sexuality. What can be purer, yet more charged with romantic suggestion, than these verses:

In her limbs divine
 Child and woman meet and twine.
 Nor mark I yet whether older she
 Of girlhood or younger of infancy.
 Beautiful Krishna, youth in her
 Its childhood begins...¹⁷

Twice I looked and then
 With a sweet and sudden pain
 Maddened Ah, what power is this
 For a look can slay with bliss?
 Even so leaps, O my dove,
 Into the heart made for him, Love.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo's versions may miss the music of the original, but the flavour remains (albeit diffused) and provides the background and the atmosphere for this drama of the Love Divine.

The selections from Nidhu Babu are (at least in translation) less sensuous than those from Vidyapati, and have less lithesome grace than Chandidas'. In their Eng-

¹⁶ *Songs of Vidyapati* (1956), p. 21.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7. ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 27.

lish form, they read almost like Elizabethan and Jacobean love lyrics:

Sweet, gaze not always on thine own face in the
mirror,
 Lest looking so on thine own wondrous beauty,
 Thou lose the habit of thy queenly duty
 And thy poor subject quite forget...¹⁹

Hast thou remembered me at last, my own,
 And therefore come after so many days?
 When man has once drained love and elsewhere
flown,

Does he return to the forgotten face?
 Therefore I think by error thou hast come,
 Or else a passing pity led thee home.²⁰

And the following has something of Donne's audacity of thought and expression:

Ere I had taken half my will of joy,
 Why hast thou, Night, with cruel swiftness ceased?
 To slay a woman's heart with sad annoy,
 O ruddy Dawn, thou openest in the east.
 The whispering world begins in dawn's red shining,
 Nor with Night stay one hour for lovers' pining.

Ere love is done, must Dawn our love discover?²¹
 Although more elaborate, it makes the same point as Donne's —

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
 Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?

It is, of course, humourless to comment on songs that

¹⁹ *Poems from Bengal* (1956), p. 13.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 37. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 23

effortlessly sing themselves out, — songs whose sentiment is sugar and honey, — songs whose theme is Love.

In the pieces from Horu Thakur, again, while love human is the exquisitely embroidered theme, the underlying symbolic meaning shows itself even without the explicit prose comment prefixed to them. The Gopis are quite obviously the god-intoxicated who have left everything — abandoned all *dharma*s — to meet their Lord and Lover and God; and when they experience a sense of desolation — the dark night of the soul — they needs must cry in anguish:

But Shyama, dost thou recollect not,
That we have left all for thy sake?
Of other thought, of other love we recked not,
Labouring thy love to wake.

Thy love's the only thought our minds reject not.²²

In Jnanadas, too, there is a deep philosophical base, but once again what irresistibly makes an assault on our emotions is the powerful rendering of the emotion of love, intelligible enough in human terms, yet also affiliated to a divine dimension. The soul separated from the Eternal: entangled in Nature: burdened with clothes (or clinging attachments): stranded on this bank and shoal of existence: tossed in the waves while crossing... the familiar images, the tell-tale situations, but the theme is love followed by the pangs of separation and the penance of devotion and the ecstasy of the reunion. At his simplest, Jnanadas too can be as overpowering as the other Vaishnava poets:

My body almost swooned away
And from my heart went fear and shame

²² *ibid.*, p. 55.

And maidenly pride; panting I lay;

He was around me like a flame.²³

Chandidas, Vidyapati, Nidhu Babu, Horu Thakur, Jnana-das — they are five notes out of which Sri Aurobindo makes, in his 'transcreations', one song, one orchestrated symphony on the theme of Love Divine in the more familiar images of universal human love.

IV

Between human and divine love, there are various other Powers that too command human affections and adorations. the country, for instance, the country as Motherland (or Fatherland), and Nature whether in its benign or in its awesome aspects — dawn, moonlight, mountain-range, the starlit sky, the sea. It was in 1909 that Sri Aurobindo's translation of Bankim's song, *Bande Mataram*, appeared in the *Karmayogin*; and years later, in 1941, his translation of Dwijendralal Roy's *Mother India* was published in the *Modern Review*. When Sri Aurobindo wrote his series of articles on Bankim in 1893-4, although he made a casual reference to *Anandamath*, there was no mention of the song itself which was a part of the novel. But the song leapt out of its obscurity and blazed into sudden prominence during the 'Partition of Bengal' explosive agitation, and has since been enshrined in the nation's heart as an inspired anthem. In Sri Aurobindo's own words,

The *mantra* had been given and in a single day a whole people had been converted to the religion of patriotism The Mother had revealed herself.... A

²³ *ibid.*, p. 81.

nation which has had that vision can never again bend its neck to the yoke of a conqueror.²⁴ Although this anthem — this magical incantation — is untranslatable into verse in another language “owing to its unique union of sweetness, simple directness and high poetic force”²⁵, Sri Aurobindo’s poetic rendering comes reasonably close to the original in its rhythmic power and spiralling suggestiveness:

Mother, I bow to thee!
 Rich with thy hurrying streams,
 Bright with thy orchard gleams,
 Cool with thy winds of delight,
 Dark fields waving, Mother of might,
 Mother free...
 Thou art wisdom, thou art law,
 Thou our heart, our soul, our breath,
 Thou the love divine, the awe
 In our hearts that conquers death...²⁶

The Mother is Durga, Lady and Queen, and she is Lakshmi the “lotus-throned”, and the Muse “a hundred-toned”; she is full beautiful with “glorious smile divine”; to her we bow, her feet we devoutly kiss!

Dwijendralal Roy’s song, if less well-known, is no less powerfully motivated by the religion of patriotism, and much of its beauty and force of articulation may be inferred from Sri Aurobindo’s English version:

India, my India, where first human eyes awoke to
 heavenly light,

²⁴ *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda* (1955), p. 13. ²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 5 (fn).

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp 3-5, also *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, pp. 227-8. Sri Aurobindo published, besides, a vigorous “line by line” prose rendering in the *Karmayogin* of 20 November 1909, which is reprinted in *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, pp. 5-6.

Songs of the Sea, Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1947:

The sea to the Indian imagination is a symbol of life, — one speaks of the ocean of the *samsara* and Indian Yoga sees in its occult visions life in the image of a sea or different planes of being as so many oceans. Das's poem expresses his communing with this ocean of universal life and psychic intimacies with the Cosmic Spirit behind it and these have a character of grave emotion and intense feeling, not of mere sentimentalism, but they come from a very Indian and even a very Bengali mentality, and may seem in translation to a different mind a profuse display of fancy and sentiment....²⁸

The very next year (1948), St. John Perse's *Amers* was published in French, in which the poet celebrated the sea and himself in the sea, even as Whitman had celebrated himself and the universe in himself. If we sought a parallel, then, *Sagar-Sangit* should be paired, not with Byron's apostrophe to the ocean in *Childe Harold*, but rather with Perse's *Amers*.²⁹ The basic symbolism in the latter is the mating of land and sea, female and male, and the gradual swell rises to a crescendo in the long ninth section of the Strophe, which is a Persean Song of Songs. In a climactic passage, human history is crammed into the undulations of a wave and Existence is seen as both the flux of appearance and as the essence of being:

In you, moving, we move, and we pronounce you

²⁸ *Life—Literature—Yoga* (1967 Edition), pp. 95-6.

²⁹ *Amers* has been translated into English by Wallace Fowle, and the bilingual edition was published in the Bollingen Series (Pantheon Books) in 1958. The English translation is entitled *Seamarks*.

the unnameable Sea; mutable and movable in her moultings, immutable and immovable in her mass; diversity in the principle and purity of Being, truth in the lie and betrayal in the message; all presence and all absence, all patience and all refusal....

And you immense compassion for all things perishable, Sea for ever irrepudiable, and Sea at last inseparable! Scourge of honour, monster of love!

Sagar-Sangit, which preceded *Amers* by almost three decades, had the same sweep of comprehension and the same variety of rhythmical articulation. In his version, *Songs of the Sea*, Sri Aurobindo tried his best "to give his (Das's) beautiful Bengali lines as excellent a shape of English poetry as I could manage".³⁰ Reasonably close to the original, the song-sequence in English has its own character and is suffused with a poetic iridescence of its own. Here are a few passages picked at random from the poem:

O thou unhopèd-for elusive wonder of the skies,
 Stand still one moment! I will lead thee and bind
 With music to the chambers of my mind.
 Behold how calm today this sea before me lies
 And quivering with what tremulous heart of
dreams

In the pale glimmer of the faint moonbeams.
 If thou at last art come indeed, O mystery, stay
 Woven by song into my heart-beats from this day...³¹

Behold, the perfect-gloried dawn has come
 Far-floating from eternity her home.

³⁰ *Life—Literature—Yoga*, p. 95.

³¹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 249.

Her limbs are clad in silver light of dreams,
Her brilliant influence on the water streams,
And in that argent flood to one white theme
Are gathering all the hues and threads of dream....³²

I sit upon thy hither shore, O main,
My gaze is on thy face. Yet sleep, O sleep!
My heart is trembling with a soundless strain,
My soul is watching by thy slumber deep ...³³

Thy huge rebuke shook all my nature, all
The narrow coasts of thought sank crumbling in.
Collapsed that play-room and that lamp was
quenched.
I stood in Ocean's thunders washed and drenched....³⁴

This shore and that shore, — I am tired, they pall.
Where thou art shoreless, take me from it all...
Have I not sought thee on a million streams,
And wheresoever the voice of music dreams,
In wondrous lights and sealing shadows caught,
And every night and every day have sought?
Pilot eternal, friend unknown embraced,
O, take me to thy shoreless self at last.³⁵

Through extracts however numerous, through comments however perceptive, it would be impossible to convey an adequate enough idea of the cumulative effect that these extraordinary 'Songs of the Sea' produce on the responsive inward ear. The whole sequence should be viewed as a single indivisible but vast beam of light, it is to be heard

³² *ibid.*, p. 252. ³³ *ibid.*, p. 262. ³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 269.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 273.

as the cry of the *jīva* for final union with the hourly experienced, yet still unapprehended, immensity and mystery and sublimity of the sea and the Universe that is like the sea. It is not simply the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean, it is these, and beyond them (but also comprehending them), it is something more elemental, more primordial, — the ultimate Existence itself! As the sea is to Ellidra in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*, to C. R. Das and to Sri Aurobindo too, the sea is a symbol of romance, symbol of the siege and the constitutive resolution of contraries, a museum and power-house of infinite consciousness-force. The arts of echo and refrain, of assonance and dissonance, of variation in movement through the adroit placing of polysyllabic words ("quivering in thy murmurous power"; "myriad serpents of infinitude"; "beginningless infinity"; "solitude of shoreless sound") to give added weight and momentum to the verse, all these are mobilised, controlled and converted into an abiding expression of the bottomless depth and mystery as also the ineluctable and "ineffugable" lure and fascination of the sea. In a hundred and one different ways is the sea invoked — it is the "unhoped-for elusive wonder of the skies", it is the "Infinite Voice", it is the "minstrel of infinity", it is the "shoreless main", it is the "great mad sea", it is the "illimitable", it is the "mighty One", and it is the "king of mysteries"; the poet thus approaches the sea as a friend, as a lover, as a loyal subject, as a devotee, as a shadow that must ever pursue the object, as a waif that would return to the bosom of the mother; and the music with its subtle undulations of dissolving sweetness fuses at last poet and reader and subject into a closed universe of harmony and bliss. It will thus be not wide of the mark to describe *Songs of*

the Sea as a lyric-sequence with a core of purposeful spirituality that places it almost — almost if not quite — in the category of mystical poetry.

V

From Sri Aurobindo's draft manuscripts, a volume entitled *Vyasa and Valmiki* was published posthumously in 1956.³⁶ This volume contained a valuable inquiry into the "Problem of the *Mahabharata*", some very stimulating "Notes on the *Mahabharata*" and a luminous fragment on "The Genius of Valmiki"; besides all this body of prose, the volume included also translations of selections from the Bala and Ayodhya Kandas of the *Ramayana* and from the Sabha and Udyoga Parvas of the *Mahabharata* — a total of about 2000 lines of blank verse. These renderings were evidently explorative and experimental, and belonged to the early Baroda period. Sri Aurobindo's first taste of our two great epics must have given him the same feeling of excitement and exhilaration that the reading of Chapman's Homer gave to young Keats:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken...

The mind racing swiftly, the heart expansive and in a flutter of thrilled delight, the sensibility growing new wings of understanding, Sri Aurobindo viewed Valmiki and Vyasa as twin Himalayan peaks of poetic achievement, he saw the differences too, and also the likeness and dif-

³⁶ A later edition of *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964) includes also a fragment of *The Tale of Nala*, a fragment of *Chitrangada* and a fragment of *Uloupy* (another version of the Chitrangada story), all in blank verse.

ference between these on the one hand and, on the other, the greatest epic poet of the West, Homer:

...these poems (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) are quite different from primitive edda and saga and greater in breadth of view and substance and height of motive—I do not speak now of aesthetic quality and poetic perfection—than the Homeric poems...³⁷

Vyasa's knowledge of character is not so intimate, emotional and sympathetic as Valmiki's; it has more of a heroic inspiration, less of a divine sympathy. He has reached not like Valmiki immediately through the heart and imagination, but deliberately through intellect and experience, a deep criticism and reading of men....³⁸

The longer speeches in the *Ramayana*, those even which have most the appearance of set, argumentative oration, proceed straight from the heart, the thoughts, words, reasonings come welling up from the dominant emotion or conflicting feeling of the speaker; they palpitate and are alive with the vital force from which they have sprung.... Vyasa's have a powerful but austere force of intellectuality. In expressing character they firmly expose it rather than spring half-consciously from it....³⁹

But there is one thing common between all supreme poets, whether of the West or of the East:

The Kavi or Vates, poet and seer, is not the

³⁷ *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, p. 321.

³⁸ *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964), p. 37.

³⁹ *ibid*, pp. 35-6.

manisī; he is not the logical thinker... his knowledge is one, not with his thought, but with his being; he has not arrived at it but has it in himself by virtue of his power to become one with all that is around him... he is what he sees; he is the hero thundering in the forefront of the battle, the mother weeping over her dead, the tree trembling violently in the storm, the flower warmly penetrated with the sunshine. And because he is these things, therefore he knows them; because he knows thus, spiritually and not rationally, he can write of them. He feels their delight and pain, he shares their virtue and sin, he enjoys their reward or bears their punishment. It is for this reason that poetry written out of the intellect is so inferior to poetry written out of the soul....⁴⁰

It is necessary to form an idea, as we can from the above extracts (and the essays from which they are taken), of Sri Aurobindo's view of great epic poetry, for this gives us also a clue both to his choice of passages for translation and the quality of the translation itself.

It is not unlikely that Sri Aurobindo at one time entertained the possibility of translating practically the whole of at least the "original" *Mahabharata* (about 25,000 slokas) and the whole of the *Ramayana*, and the "Notes" and the experiments in translation were his first soundings in the oceanic vastness of the two epics. Other interests — politics, poetry, political journalism, Yoga, Yogashram — must have gradually pushed the original intention out of the field of actual execution. But the specimens that remain — even if they are no more than "drafts" — are certainly suggestive of the

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

great unfulfilled possibilities. Let us now take a closer look at these experiments in translating our ancient epics at a time when Sri Aurobindo was still in his nonage.⁴¹

The choice of the Cantos is, in a sense, itself indicative of an artistic intention: in the *Ramayana*, first the description of Ayodhya, then three forays into the magnificently dramatic Ayodhya Kanda. It is the perfect tragedy, the coronation turning into exile. The "reversal of fortune", of course, is engineered by Manthara, Kaikeyi and Dasaratha (in that order). But Rama's fate impinges with particular force on two women, Kausalya and Sita — the mother and the wife. Sri Aurobindo therefore chooses passages from Sarga 20 and Sargas 26-30 for translation: Kausalya's tears are the background, while the issue between Rama and Sita is the foreground drama. Only a few fragments chosen as if at random — An Aryan City: Dasaratha's Speech to the States-General: A Mother's Lament: The Wife — and, whether intended or not, there is here a whole drama packed with irony and catastrophe, poetry and pity, defiance and triumph.

Ayodhya the "Aryan City", — "a city without earthly peer"! And a city world-renowned, built by Manu of old:

Defiant

Ayodhya stood, armed impregnable,

Inviolat in her virgin walls...

Mass upon serried mass the houses rose,

⁴¹ On one of his visits to Baroda, Romesh Chunder Dutt is said to have remarked about Sri Aurobindo's translations from the epics: "Had I seen them before, I would never have published mine. It now appears that my translations have been child's play beside yours." (Dinendra Kumar Roy, *Arabinda-Prasanga*, pp. 38-9.)

Seven-storied architectures metrical

On a level base, and made sublime.⁴²

Its King, aged Dasaratha, summons his States-General and asks whether he might share the burden of kingly cares with Rama his son; and with loud acclaim they agree. And now from the great city and its throne, Rama is to be doubly exiled: peripeteia, sudden and total. The shock is deeply felt by Kausalya, for this comes as the culminating shame and agony of her life:

Cruelly neglected, grievously oppressed

I have lived slighted in my husband's house

As though Kaikeyi's serving-woman...

And now this mighty anguish without end!⁴³

She is half-crushed by the accumulated wrongs of a lifetime, and here is the final shattering blow! She would follow Rama to the woods, if she might...

Then comes the great encounter with Sita the Wife. It is a complete miniature drama in itself. Sita's high expectations — her sharp forebodings at the sight of Rama — Rama's strangely faltering and unconvincing speech:

But thou before King Bharat speak my name

Seldom: thou knowest great and wealthy men

Are jealous and endure not others' praise.

Speak low and humbly of me when thou speakest,

Observing all his moods...

Cross not Bharat

Even slightly in his will. He is thy king,

Monarch of thee and monarch of our house

And all this nation. 'Tis by modest awe

And soft obedience and high toilsome service

That princes are appeased, but being crossed

⁴² *Vyasa and Valmiki*, p. 184.

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

Most dangerous grow the wrathful hearts of kings...⁴⁴
 Was it really so bad as that? Or was Rama but prodding
 and testing Sita — prodding a wound with fiery coal?
 But Sita answers steadily:

What words are these,
 Rama, from thee? What frail unworthy spirit
 Converses with me uttering thoughts depraved,
 Inglorious, full of ignominy...
 Rama, this day thou journeyest, I will walk
 Before thee, treading down the thorns and sharp
 Grasses, smoothing with my torn feet thy way...
 O Rama, Paradise and thou not there
 No Paradise were to my mind...⁴⁵

The forest and its dangers do not frighten her. Even when
 Rama conjures up a vision of the horrors awaiting them
 in the forest — unfordable rivers, the python's haunt,
 thirsty tedious paths, reptiles of all shapes, fierce scor-
 pions — she is unmoved:

O Rama, they are joys if borne for thee,
 For thy dear love...

Ayodhya without Rama would be hell; *āranya* with Rama
 would be heaven. And in a raging climactic moment she
 hurls the terrible words at Rama:

Surely my father erred, great Mithila
 Who rules and the Videhas, that he chose
 Thee with his line to mate, Rama unworthy,
 No man but woman in male disguise...⁴⁶

So, after all, Rama has to capitulate, and hasn't he
 really expected this, really wanted this? He says simply:

Heaven's joys
 Without thee now were beggarly and rude.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 194-5 ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 195-8.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 201.

A distantly parallel situation is Portia (in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*) claiming and winning equality with her husband, Brutus, who is forced in the end to answer her defiance with disarming acquiescence, and exclaim prayerfully: "O ye gods, render me worthy of this noble wife!"

With his sure instinct, Sri Aurobindo equated the *anuṣṭup* metre in Sanskrit with English blank verse, avoiding alike the Heroic couplet and the *Locksley Hall* metre used by R. C. Dutt in his version of the epics. Sri Aurobindo's blank verse with its easy transitions in pause, effortless modulations and well-structured verse paragraphs proves a tractable enough medium for the expression of the whole range of emotion covered in the speeches of Kausalya, Rama and Sita. It is possible to enjoy these passages simply as English poetry, forgetting for the nonce that they are but translations from Valmiki. And, after all, this is the real test of a good translation.

VI

Sri Aurobindo may have loved the *Ramayana* more, but he was more inescapably gripped by the *Mahabharata*. His narrative poems, *Urvashi* and *Love and Death*, and the great symbolistic epic, *Savitri*, were all quarried in the first instance from the *Mahabharata*. He commented on the *Gita* (which has a central place in the epic) in a long series of luminous essays. He translated *Vidula* and published it in the *Bande Mataram* in 1909. And there are also the translations included in *Vyasa and Valmiki*. The sheer masculinity of Vyasa, his massive intellectual sweep, his rich experience of men and affairs, his superb grasp of the minutiae of politics and morals,

his infallible insight into the dark caverns and his familiarity with the sunlit peaks of human nature, all made Vyasa an "unmixed Olympian". With his own wide-ranging interests, it was not surprising that Sri Aurobindo felt more often attracted by Vyasa — he was more often engaged by Vyasa — than even by Valmiki.

These renderings from the *Mahabharata* were, however, clearly of an earlier date than those from the *Ramayana*. Sri Aurobindo tries here Heroic (rhymed) verse, which considerably shackles his freedom and makes him coin words like "famousest" (to rhyme with "best"); and there are unpleasant inversions like "Deeds unattempted virtue maimed evince" or "Nor offering hospitable take we can". In his selective approach, Sri Aurobindo's choice has fallen on the construction of the great Hall and the adroit moves towards the Rajasuya Sacrifice, which have less emotional but more political or intellectual content than the passages translated from the *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata* renderings thus suffer in comparison with those from the *Ramayana*, and, besides, we have here but a first essay in translation, and merely a first draft of that early exercise. We cannot look for perfection here, nor even high achievement.

Even admitting all this, there are not wanting lines — even passages — that bespeak not only future promise but a measure of present achievement as well. This description of Dharma Rajya, for example:

The thriving provinces were void of fear;
 Strife was forgotten, and each liberal year
 The rains were measured to desire; nor man
 The natural limit of his course outran;
 Usury, tillage, rearing, merchandise
 Throve with good government, and sacrifice

Prospered; rack-renting was not, nor unjust
 Extortion; from the land pestilence was thrust,
 And mad calamity of fire unknown
 Became, while this just monarch had his own...
 Even greedy, passionate, luxurious men
 His just rule to the common welfare turned.⁴⁷

And here is Yudhisthira's speech to Krishna when seeking his counsel:

Some from affection lovingly suppress
 Their friend's worst fault, and some from selfishness
 Speaking what most will please. Others conceal
 Their own good with the name of commonweal.
 Such counsel in his need a monarch hath.
 But thou art pure... and thou wilt tell
 What shall be solely and supremely well.⁴⁸

The discussion between the brothers and Krishna regarding the desirability of the Rajasuya Sacrifice is very revealing on an intellectual and political level.⁴⁹ In the later conversation with Jarasandha, some lines at least stand out:

Is there a man in all the world whose mind
 Like thine is violent, like thine is blind?...
 For what is Indra's heaven, what Paradise?
 Heaven in noble deeds and virtue lies....

Why was Sri Aurobindo drawn particularly to these episodes in the main *Mahabharata* story? Wasn't it because they gave a clue to the working of the mind of Krishna, the real *sutradhara* behind the vast drama of the epic of Bharat?

⁴⁷ *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964), p 106 ⁴⁸ *ibid* , p. 110.

⁴⁹ "This conversation," says Rajaji, "has a curiously modern ring about it and shows that powerful men in ancient times used very much the same specious reasoning as now" (*Mahabharata*, 1970 Edition, p 77).

A later edition of *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964) included also a fragment from *The Tale of Nala* and two different versions of the Chitrangada story (one of which had appeared in the *Karmayogin* and later in the Annual of the Sri Aurobindo Circle, 1949, Bombay), both from the *Mahabharata*. All these are in blank verse, which probably implies that they were written some time after the Sabha Parva fragments. From the beginning, Sri Aurobindo was attracted to the Nala and Savitri stories:

Here (i.e. in the Nala and Savitri stories) we have the very morning of Vyasa's genius, when he was young and ardent, perhaps still under the immediate influence of Valmiki ... The Nala therefore has the delicate and unusual romantic grace of a young and severe classic who has permitted himself to go a-maying in the fields of romance. There is a remote charm of restraint in the midst of abandon, of vigilance in the play of fancy which is passing sweet and strange. ..⁵⁰

The 150-line Nala fragment (itself made up of two separate passages) shows better metrical organisation and verbal artistry than the extracts from the Sabha Parva. Only one excerpt can be given here:

The birds were voiceless on the unruffled boughs,
The spotted lizard in a dull-eyed ease
Basked on his sentinel stone, a single kite
Circled above; white-headed over rust
Of brown and gold he stained the azure moon.
Solitary in the spaces of his mind
Among these sights and sounds King Nala paced
Oblivious of the joy of world and kind.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964), p. 21. ⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 137-8.

Of the remaining two fragments from the *Mahabharata* — both on the Chitrangada theme — *Uloupy* was probably the earlier, abandoned in favour of the later *Chitrangada* which, although completed, has come down to us only in this fragmentary form. Both Urvasie and Chitra exercised a strange fascination over Tagore as well as Sri Aurobindo. In the latter's rendering of the theme, Chitrangada seems to accept the inevitability of Arjuna parting from her sooner or later:

Thou art not ours

More than the wind that lingers for a while

To touch our hair, then passes to its home.⁵²

Tagore brought his own insights into his subtle delineation of Chitra, and Sri Aurobindo doubtless gave his own colouring to the portrait of this warrior-woman who became Arjuna's greatly prized lover and Queen. The tale, however, breaks off suddenly, leaving us with the sense of promises unfulfilled.

Vidula, also from the *Mahabharata*, is a maturer work than the fragments considered so far, and when it first appeared in the *Bande Mataram* it was admirably pointed to the occasion and carried the caption "The Mother to Her Son". The "mother" in the poem is Vidula, a widowed Queen; her son, Sunjoy, has been dispossessed of his patrimony by the King of Sindhu. Sunjoy, however, has grown apathetic, and will not lift his finger to regain the throne of his forefathers. He feels that, circumstanced as he is, any attempt on his part to oust the proud conqueror must prove futile; he therefore plays for safety — safety in dishonour. Vidula, on the contrary, is an "unwomanly woman" in the Shavian sense; she addresses spirited words to her son so unmanly, trying to rouse him

⁵² *ibid*, p. 144

Sunjoy, Sunjoy, waste not thou thy flame in smoke!
Impetuous, dire,
Leap upon thy foes for havoc as a famished lion
leaps,
Storming through thy vanquished victors till thou
fall on slaughtered heaps...
Shrink not from a noble action, stoop not to
unworthy deed!
Vile are they who stoop, they gain not Heaven's
doors, nor here succeed...
When thou winnest difficult victory from the
clutch of fearful strife,
I shall know thou art my offspring and shall love my
son indeed."⁵³

Sri Aurobindo admits that the style of the original Sanskrit is "terse, brief, packed and allusive, sometimes knotted into a pregnant obscurity by the drastic economy of words and phrase".⁵⁴ But the "free poetic paraphrase" — and that is what *Vidula* is — does convey an adequate enough impression of the original, and occasional lines like —

Gathering here an earthly glory, shining there like
Indra's sun...
Lo! we toss in shoreless waters, be the haven to
our sail!

Lo! we drown in monstrous billows, be our boat
with kindly hail!⁵⁵

assume a steel blade's edge and shine. However, it is

⁵³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, pp. 231-2, 233; 234; 241; and 242.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p 231. ⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp 236, 238.

VII

Some of Sri Aurobindo's English renderings from Bhartrihari seem to have originally appeared in the *Baroda College Magazine* in the eighteen nineties.⁵⁷ But the *Niti Shataka* as a whole — carrying the title *The Century of Life* — was published only in 1924. The renderings — “free” rather than literal — generally manage to reproduce the content as well as the temper of the originals. Sri Aurobindo has tried a variety of stanza-forms, and one can judge his feeling for words even by merely scrutinising some of the titles: “The Human Cobra”, “Aut Caesar aut Nullus”, “Altruism Oceanic”, “The Immutable Courage”, “The Script of Fate”, “Flowers from a Hidden Root”, “The Flame of the Soul”, “The Rainlark to the Cloud”, “Mountain Moley”, “The Might of Works”, etc. Not being narrative poetry, each piece stands on its own, has its own inner logic, and its own structural organisation. This is working in miniature, and Sri Aurobindo seems to have got into the spirit of the exercise and imposed on himself the needed discipline.⁵⁸ Only a few quotations can be given here to convey an idea of both the distilled wisdom of Bhartrihari and of the grace and epigrammatic finish of Sri Aurobindo's English renderings. Here is the portrait of the “Man of Action”:

Happiness is nothing, sorrow nothing. He

Recks not of these whom his clear thoughts impel

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. I, Publisher's Note.

⁵⁸ In translating Bhartrihari's epigrams “which are as concise and lapidary as the Greek”, Sri Aurobindo nevertheless “indulged my tendency at the time which was predominantly romantic: the version presents faithfully enough the ideas of Bhartrihari but not the spirit and manner of his style”. (*Life—Literature—Yoga*, p. 96).

tion of graded wickedness culminating in the "Abomination" itself:

Rare are the hearts that for another's joy
 Fling from them self and hope of their own bliss;
 Himself unhurt for other's good to try
 Man's impulse and his common nature is:
 But they who for their poor and selfish aims
 Hurt others, are but fiends with human names.
 Who hurt their brother-men, themselves unhelped,
 What they are we know not, nor what horror

whelped.⁶²

Epigrammatic and aphoristic, *The Century of Life* is reared upon experience and worldly wisdom and the received imperatives of Dharma; but the incandescent fury of poetic imagination but fitfully lights up these verses. Nevertheless the verses are crystal-pure and also crystal-clear, and one cannot withhold admiration from a literary craftsman who can turn out of his forge lines like:

Only man's soul looks out with luminous eyes
 Upon the worlds illimitably wise..

The sweet fair girl-wife broken with bridal bliss...

Seven griefs are as seven daggers in my heart...

In the dim-glinting womb and luminous murk...

Thorns are her nature, but her face the rose!⁶³

The Century of Life belongs to the class of gnomic verse, *subhashita*, a literary form rather peculiar to Sanskrit, in which the appeal is usually to the head and not to the heart. But as Sri Aurobindo has rightly pointed out, "in the work of Bhartrihari it assumes the proportions of genius, because he writes not only with

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 200. ⁶³ *ibid.*, pp 218, 189, 194, 211 and 217.

the thought but with emotion, with what might be called a moved intellectuality of the feeling and an intimate experience that gives great potency and sometimes poignancy to his utterance".⁶⁴ Even in translation, as we have seen, there are flashes that penetrate deeper than the intellect and reveal more than the crystallisation of worldly wisdom.

VIII

It was inevitable that, once he had plunged into Sanskrit studies, Sri Aurobindo should feel drawn (sooner than later), as iron to magnet, to the poetic genius of Kalidasa. Sri Aurobindo seems to have made, in the early Baroda period, drafts of translations of *Vikramorvasie*, *Meghaduta* and the first canto of *Kumarasambhava*, — perhaps of Kalidasa's other works too. While the rendering of *Vikramorvasie*, as revised, saw publication in 1911 as *The Hero and the Nymph*, the translation of the *Meghaduta* has not been recovered so far; the three early drafts of the translation of *Kumarasambhava*, however, are now published,⁶⁵ along with Sri Aurobindo's early essays on Kalidasa, on the problem of translating Kalidasa and on some of the characters in Kalidasa. From all this, one thing is clear: Sri Aurobindo set about the task of translation always with a sense of commitment, and only after clarifying to his own satisfaction the principles that should govern each particular adventure in translation. Also, he continually experimented: for example, we have seen how he tried the Heroic couplet, the *Locksley Hall* metre and, finally,

⁶⁴ *Foundations of Indian Culture*, p 343.

⁶⁵ *Kalidasa*, Second Series (1954, reprinted, 1964).

blank verse for rendering the *anushtup* metre of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. He used a variety of metrical and stanza patterns for *The Century of Life*. And he used a five-line stanza in his first draft of *The Birth of the War-God*, but switched over to blank verse in the second and third drafts of the same poem. Sri Aurobindo was thus not averse to experimenting and learning and experimenting again.

On the question of translating Kalidasa, Sri Aurobindo makes certain points which are indeed capable of a wider application to the translation of Indian poetry generally to any modern European language. The problem is difficult, yet it must be solved; and the difficulty would be proportionate to the greater perfection of the poem to be translated. Describing the *Meghaduta*, Sri Aurobindo resorts to superlatives:

...the most marvellously perfect descriptive and elegiac poem in the world's literature. Every possible beauty of phrase, every possible beauty of sound, every grace of literary association, every source of imaginative and sensuous beauty has been woven together into a harmony which is without rival and without fault, for amidst all its wealth of colour, delicacy and sweetness, there is not a word too much or too little, no false note, no excessive or defective touch; the colouring is just and subdued in its richness, the verse movement regular in its variety, the diction simple in its suggestiveness, the emotion convincing and fervent behind a certain high restraint...⁶⁶

Such a masterpiece most certainly deserves to be introduced to English readers, but "its qualities of diction and

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 35-6.

verse cannot be rendered.... We must be content to lose something in order that we may not lose all". Again, how is the translator to find an equivalent for the *mandakranta* — "gently stepping" — metre? Sri Aurobindo writes, in justification of his choice of *terza rima*:

...I was only certain of one thing that neither blank verse nor the royal quatrain stanza would serve my purpose; the one has not the necessary basis of recurring harmonics; in the other the recurrence is too rigid, sharply defined and unvarying to represent the eternal swell and surge of Kalidasa's stanza. Fortunately, by an inspiration and without deliberate choice, Kalidasa's lines, as I began turning them, flowed into the form of triple rhyme and that necessarily suggested the *terza rima*.⁶⁷

Aside from the merits of the essay itself, 'On Translating Kalidasa' is valuable because he cites in the course of it two or three stanzas from his own rendering of the *Meghaduta*, the otherwise lost *Cloud-Messenger* in *terza rima*, the metre of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. We have now perforce to be satisfied with these significant samples of the translator's art:

Dark like the cloudy food of highest God

When starting from the dwarf-shape world-immense
With Titan-quelling step through heaven he strode.. .

Of Tripur slain in lovely dances joined

And linkèd troops the Oreads of the hill
Are singing and inspired with rushing wind

Sweet is the noise of bamboos fluting shrill;
Thou thundering in the mountain-glens with cry

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

Of drums shouldst the sublime orchestra fill.⁶⁸

While giving a detailed account of the reasons for various minor deviations from the original, Sri Aurobindo nevertheless claims an "essential fidelity which underlies the apparent freedom of my translation". While this may be arguable, there is no doubt we have lost, in the loss of his manuscript, one of his finest efforts as a translator.

Sri Aurobindo's translation of the first canto of *Kumara-sambhava* — *The Birth of the War-God* — is particularly interesting because we have three successive drafts — for some slokas, four drafts — to facilitate comparative study and mark the progress in the freedom of translation. Let us take a look at one sweep of thought and wave of sound in the four successive versions, two in stanza-form and two in blank verse:

Because the Soma plant for sacrifice
 He rears and for his strength upbearing Earth
 The Lord of creatures gave to this great birth
 His sacrificial share and ministries
 And empire over all the mountains to his worth...

Because he rears for sacrifice the plant
 Of honeyed wine, his sacred share fulfilled,
 And for his many strengths upbearing Earth
 The Father of the peoples' very hands
 Crowned him the monarch of a million hills...

He bears
 The honey Soma plant upon his heights,
 Of Godward symbols the exalted source.
 He by the Master of sacrifice was crowned
 The ancient monarch of a million hills...

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 24, 31.

...moonlit he bears,
 Of godward symbols the exalted source,
 The mystic Soma-plant upon his heights.
 He by the Father of the sacrifice crowned,
 Headman and dynast of earth's soaring hills.⁶⁹

Is the word 'Soma', which has profound associations for us but which may not carry the same spiral of suggestion for the English reader, to be retained in translation or not? In the second draft it becomes "the plant of honeyed wine", but 'Soma' is restored in the third and fourth versions. "All the mountains" becomes "a million hills" in the second and third version, and ends up in the last as "earth's soaring hills". It is a continuing effort to fuse fidelity to the text with poetic viability in a foreign language, and when (for example) we reach "the mystic Soma-plant" we know that the right phrase has at last been found, for "Soma" is retained and the substitution of "mystic" for "honey" brings out the fact that this plant is like no other. Here is another passage in the two later versions only (by then Sri Aurobindo seems to have abandoned the stanza form):

Even as a painting grows beneath the hand
 Of a great master, as the lotus opens
 Its petals to the flatteries of the sun,
 So into perfect roundness grew her limbs
 And opened up sweet colour, form and light...

Her forms into a perfect roundness grew
 And opened up sweet colour, grace and light.
 So might a painting grow beneath the hand
 Of some great master, so a lotus opens
 Its bosom to the splendour of the sun.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 108, 108 (fn), 113, 127. ⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 116, 131

The second flows with greater natural ease than the first, and charms us by the beauty of its finish, and as we move from draft to draft, we too have the feeling that we are watching "a painting grow beneath the hand of some great master". This infinite patience, this readiness to revise and refine, to recast and remould, this constant self-examination as to the limits of freedom and the meaning of fidelity, this tireless search for equivalent idiom, image and metre, all bespeak the Hero as Translator, a Hercules at one of his difficult tasks. Bringing the power of great Sanskrit poetry into English verse was like bringing the Supermind into the human physical, vital and mental; but it was an effort of transformation worth attempting, and it was in that spirit that Sri Aurobindo seems to have adventured in the seemingly intractable tasks of translation.

IX

Of Sri Aurobindo's translations, only one other major work remains to be considered — *The Hero and the Nymph*. In attempting to render Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie* into English verse, Sri Aurobindo knew he was daring the impossible, yet he was not daunted. Romantic, fascinating, tantalisingly remote from everyday experience, *Vikramorvasie* was not easily to be coaxed into changing her robes. That Sri Aurobindo's translation was no cavalier exercise but the result of a deep study of the play could be seen from the essays on the characters — Pururavas, Urvasie, and the rest — that he wrote at the time and have since been recovered and published. Unless the translator could seize the cha-

acters in the play in an act of imaginative attention, his task of putting their speeches into the idiom of another language must prove very frustrating. But once the characters and the characters in action have been so seized, the rest of the problem might prove easy of solution.

The story is easily told. Pururavas, the vanquisher of the Titans, is smitten with love for Urvasie, a beautiful nymph (apsara); Pururavas is already married, and there are the usual complications; but there's a divinity that shapes our ends, and thus all is well at the end. One may call it the *ne plus ultra* of romance: we visit harbours and are ravished by the moonlight; we scale great mountain heights, we visit Saint Bharat's hermitage in heaven, we watch the adorations, the fertile tears, the queer antics, and the blissful-cum-agonied ecstasies of Pururavas and Urvasie. And *The Hero and the Nymph* does succeed to a large extent in capturing and communicating the fever and the flavour and the elusive fascination of the original to English readers.

Pururavas is a warrior and king, but in the play itself it is the lover and the poet that is to the foreground "Surely no king before or after", says Sri Aurobindo, "not even Richard II, had such a royal gift of language as this grandson of the Sun and Moon. It is peculiar to him in the play".⁷¹ It is predestined that such a Hero as he should fall for and win such a nonpareil apsara as Urvasie:

The Urvasie of the myth... is the spirit of imaginative beauty in the universe, the unattainable ideal for which the soul of man is eternally panting, the goddess adored of the nympholept in all

⁷¹ *Kahdasa* (Second Series), p. 52.

lands and in all ages. There is but one who can attain her, the man whose mind has become one mass of poetry and idealism and has made life itself identical with poetry, whose glorious and star-like career has itself been a conscious epic and whose soul holds friendship and close converse with the Gods. This is Pururavas. ⁷²

But the Hero is recognisable man as well, and the *apsara* is recognisable woman, the "blessed feminine", blessed as well as beautiful; "if this is a nymph of heaven, one thinks, then heaven must be beautifully like the earth!"⁷³

In the play itself, what does not one come across — valour, peril, heroism, distraction, jealousy, love's ecstasy, the frenzy of separation, even pleasantry and humour! And blank verse, as handled by Sri Aurobindo, is seen to be an elastic enough instrument for the expression of all these vagaries and varieties of emotion and passion. One may laugh at, or with, Manavaka the Brahmin jester and King's companion, whose witticisms and profoundest observations alike originate from his inveterate gluttony. He is of course somewhat disagreeably loud when he plays the clown:

Houp! Houp! I feel like a Brahmin who has had an invitation to dinner; he thinks dinner, talks dinner, looks dinner, his very sneeze has the music of the dinner-bell in it.⁷⁴

But elsewhere, Manavaka's humour is more delightfully capricious and has the added charm of being expressed in the nervous rhythms of everyday speech:

⁷² *ibid*, p. 54. ⁷³ *ibid*, p. 67.

⁷⁴ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 16

Yes, I too when I cannot get sweet venison
And hunger for it, often beguile my belly
With celebrating all its savoury joys...

Why, what is there in Heaven to pine for? There
You do not eat, you do not drink, only
Stare like so many fishes in a row
With wide unblinking eyes.⁷⁵

But the play's real glory centres round the exquisite love drama of which Pururavas and Urvasie are the protagonists. They find and lose, and lose and find, themselves over and over again, and these alternations determine the general rhythm of the play. Pururavas, coming upon Urvasie as she stands, "her eyes closed in terror, supported on the right arm of Chitrakleha", thus gallantly addresses her:

O thou too lovely!
Recall thy soul. The enemies of Heaven
Can injure thee no more; that danger's over.
The Thunderer's puissance still pervades the worlds.
O then uplift these long and lustrous eyes
Like sapphire lilies in a pool where dawn
Comes smiling.⁷⁶

How deftly is the transition achieved from the terrific energy of the Thunderer's puissance to the "long lustrous eyes" of the *apsara*!

The same command over both the dynamics of blank verse and the magic of sound values in English is revealed in many another passage as well, where too the verse luxuriates into arabesque and gives us symphonies like these:

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 48, 58 ⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

'Tis noon. The tired
 And heated peacock sinks to chill delight
 Of water in the tree-encircling channel,
 The bee divides a crimson bud and creeps
 Into its womb; there merged and safe from fire,
 He's lurking. The duck too leaves her blazing pool
 And shelters in cold lilies on the bank,
 And in yon summer-house weary of heat
 The parrot from his cage for water cries...⁷⁷

How beautifully twilight sits and dreams
 Upon these palace walls! The peacocks now
 Sit on their perches, drowsed with sleep and night,
 Like figures hewn in stone. And on the roof
 The fluttering pigeons with their pallid wings
 Mislead the eye, disguised as rings of smoke
 That from the window-ways have floated out
 Into the evening...⁷⁸

The lily of the night
 Needs not to guess it is the moon's cool touch.
 She starts not to the sunbeam. 'Tis so with me
 No other woman could but she alone
 Heal with her little hands all my sick pining.⁷⁹

Noon or twilight or night, Nature yields her charms to the poet, and following Kalidasa, Sri Aurobindo paints them vividly and memorably with his English brush.

Later still, Pururavas strings together many pathetic fallacies and felicities in description into one long, nervous, polyphonic, polychromatic rhapsody. Once again, it is worth quoting Sri Aurobindo himself about Pururavas in a frenzy of frustration in love and poetising exuberance:

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 39. ⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 42. ⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 56

...he is not mad like Lear or Ophelia; it is rather a temporary exaltation than a perversion or aberration from his natural state... The whole essential temperament of the man comes whirling out in a gyrating pomp of tropes, fancies, conceits, quick and changing emotions; everything in existence he gifts with his own mind, speech, feelings and thus moves through the pageantry of Nature draping it in the regal mantle of his imagination until the whole world exists only to be the scene and witness of his sorrow...⁸⁰

Exclamation, distraction, surprise, reminiscence, bitter regrets, hopes that seem hopeless, apostrophes, accusations, piercing shrieks, sedate ruminations, all are thrown seemingly helter-skelter into one prolonged splendour of phosphorescent poetry. Sri Aurobindo artfully manages the shifting rhythms, the raging emotions, the racing images — and one not merely feels and hears, one verily *sees* the whole drama unrolling before one's eyes. Pururavas hurries forward, hoping to reach the hands of Urvasie; he is mistaken —

Me miserable! This was
 No anklets' cry embraceable with hands,
 But moan of swans who seeing the grey wet sky
 Grow passionate for Himalay's distant tarns.
 Well, be it so. But ere in far desire
 They leap up from this pool, I well might learn
 Tidings from them of Urvasie.⁸¹

In Venkatanatha's *Hamsa Sandesa* too, Rama accosts a swan and sends (after the manner of the Yaksha in *Meghaduta*) a message through her to Sita from whom

⁸⁰ *Kahdasa* (Second Series), pp. 56-7.

⁸¹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 68.

he is separated. These are not conceits merely or pathetic fallacies, for the poet creates out of them "nurslings of immortality". Pururavas thus addresses in turn the swan, the chakravak bird "all saffron and vermillion", the "lotus-wooing bee", the "rut-dripping elephant"; attracted to the last specially, Pururavas says:

More to thee I stand
Attracted, elephant, as like with like.
Sovereign of sovereigns is my title, thou
Art monarch of the kingly elephants,
And this wide freedom of thy fragrant rut
Interminable imitates my own
Vast liberality to suppliant men,
Regally; thou hast in all the herd this mate,
I among loveliest women Urvasie.
In all things art thou like me; only I pray,
O friend, that thou mayest never know the pang,
The loss.⁸²

He cannot see Urvasie still, the place is too dark; there are no streaks of lightning either, and the stupendous cloud itself "is widowed of the lightning through my sin". Even so, Pururavas will not lose hope; he will question the "huge pile of scaling crags"; he will fanatically clutch at the accents of the Echo — and he falls down at last in a swoon, screaming out to the crags the name of his beloved. And so we watch, as does Urvasie herself, the incredible vicissitudes of Pururavas' agony till, almost as exhausted as the Hero-Lover is, we are relieved to know that the lovers are reunited indeed; and we can even catch a glimpse of the celestial nymph as the delighted lover accosts her:

⁸² *ibid*, p. 71.

Thus stand awhile. O fairest,
 Thy face, suffused with crimson from this gem
 Above thee pouring wide its fire and splendour,
 Has all the beauty of a lotus reddening
 In early sunlight.⁸³

At Sri Aurobindo's magic touch, Kalidasa's superb figures are rekindled into a flame of beauty and his immortal play has won a sure habitation in the realms of English poetry.⁸⁴

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁴ When an Indian critic charged Sri Aurobindo "with modern nineteenth-century romanticism and a false imitation of Elizabethan drama" in his rendering of *Vikramorvasie* as *The Hero and the Nymph*, he answered thus: "But Kalidasa's play is romantic in its whole tone and he might almost be described as an Elizabethan predating by a thousand years at least the Elizabethans, indeed most of the ancient Sanskrit dramas are of this kind, though the tragic note is missing, and the general spirit resembles that of Elizabethan romantic comedy. So I do not think I committed any fault in making the translation romantic and in trying to make it Elizabethan" (*Life—Literature—Yoga*, 1967, p. 96).

CHAPTER FIVE

EPIC AND ROMANCE

I

Even before Sri Aurobindo started on his translation, *The Hero and the Nymph*, he had been sufficiently captivated by the theme to produce a long romantic narrative on the subject. *Urvasie*¹ was published in Baroda in 1896; it thus belongs to the period of Sri Aurobindo's first years in India, on his return after 'a long sojourn in England. When the poem was offered to an English publisher, it was referred to Lionel Johnson who "acknowledged some poetic merit but said that it was a repetition of Matthew Arnold"; and Sri Aurobindo adds: "But Lionel Johnson, I was told, like the Vedantic sage who sees Brahman in all things, saw Arnold everywhere".² In the nineties of the last century, romanticism had not yet ceased to be fashionable, and *Urvasie* — whether Arnoldian or no — wasn't quite out of tune with the age.

Urvasie is a poem of approximately 1,500 lines, and is divided into four cantos: the length and cast of a small epic like *Paradise Regained*. The story is substantially Kalidasa's still, but it is here rendered as a metrical romance in blank verse. Admirably proportioned, *Urvasie* is interspersed with many passages that evoke colour and

¹ The reader is referred to the present writer's long article "Urvasi" (*Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1949) for a historical study of the Urvasi-Pururavas myth from *Rig Veda* and *Satapatha Brahmana* to Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore.

² *Life—Literature—Yoga*, pp. 100-1.

sound with a compelling sureness of touch and a rare self-confidence. And there are not wanting passages where the words move like winged squadrons, radiating a nervous potency of suggestion romantic to the marrow.

Sri Aurobindo evidently desired to treat the story of Pururavas and Urvasie on an epic scale almost, and also to underline what may be called its "national" significance; he accordingly made certain departures from the purely dramatic unfolding of the theme in Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie*. The Urvasie myth has indeed shown an easy adaptability and a limitless flexibility through the ages. Hymnist and ritualist, chronicler and romancer, theologian and playwright, — to them all it has been legitimate prey. But Sri Aurobindo's approach was "integral" (if that word which has gathered so much significance may be used here), and in his ambitious epic canvas are brought the essential elements in the Vedic-Brahmanic, the later Puranic and the Kalidasan renderings of the myth.

The war against the Titans having come to a victorious close, Pururavas the warrior-king now turns earthward, happy to breathe our mortal air, to drink into his soul the "virgin silence" of the mountains, to divine "his mother's breasts"; and he gazes into

...the quiet maiden East,

Watching that birth of day, as if a line
Of some great poem out of dimness grew,
Slowly unfolding into perfect speech.
The grey lucidity and pearliness
Bloomed more and more, and over earth chaste again
The freshness of the primal dawn returned,
Life coming with a virginal sharp strength,
Renewed as from the streams of Paradise.

Nearer it drew now to him and he saw
 Out of the widening glory move a face
 Of dawn, a body fresh from mystery,
 Enveloped with a prophecy of light
 More rich than perfect splendours. It was she,
 The golden virgin, Usha...³

Sri Aurobindo is endlessly fascinated by the magic phenomenon of Dawn — both his later poems, *Ilion* and *Savitri*, beginning with elaborate marvellously wrought evocations of this magic-tinted many-toned phenomenon. In the fragment, *Chitrangada*, which was written perhaps not long after *Urvasie*, there is another striking description of Dawn:

In Manipur upon her orient hills
 Chitrangada beheld intending dawn
 Gaze coldly in...
 The silence and imperfect pallor passed
 Into her heart and in herself she grew
 Prescient of grey realities.⁴

The 'Dawn' in *Urvasie* is a richer piece of embroidery yet not comparable, in its suggestion of mystic overtones, to 'Dawn over Ilion' or 'The Symbol Dawn'; it is more of a bright promissory note for these greater riches to come. An early poem, *Urvasie* has the sensuousness, the vernal opulence, even perhaps the unbridled effervescence of romantic youth. But it is without question authentic poetry.

Pururavas, now in a mood of happy relaxation, happens to catch a glimpse of the apsaras basking in Dawn's unfolding immaculate loveliness, — and "among them she", the golden incomparable Urvasie —

³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, pp. 39-40.

⁴ *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964), p. 143.

And seeing her Pururavas the king
 Shuddered as of felicity afraid,
 And all the wide heart of Pururavas
 Moved like the sea — when with a coming wind
 Great Ocean lifts in far expectancy
 Waiting to feel the shock, so was he moved
 By expectation of her face. For this
 Was secret in its own divinity
 Like a high sun of splendour...⁵

Pururavas is stirred to the depths: his soul “whirls alien”, and he hears amazed “the galloping of uncontrollable steeds”; Urvasie is verily a decree of fate, and their union is “magically inevitable as a perfect verse from the Veda”. The life he has lived, the life that now yawns ahead vague and ambrosial, — which is the dream, and which the reality? “O Urvasie”, he cries, “set thy feet upon my heart!” Sri Aurobindo here interposes a splendid epic simile, rather Arnoldian in manner, to bring out the predicament of Pururavas, inescapably caught in the meshes of Love’s sovereignty:

As when a man to the grey face of dawn
 Awaking from an unremembered dream,
 Repines at life awhile and buffets back
 The wave of old familiar thoughts, and hating
 His usual happiness and usual cares
 Strives to recall a dream’s felicity; —
 Long strives in vain and rolls his painful thought
 Through many alien ways, when sudden comes
 A flash, another, and the vision burns
 Like lightning in the brain, so leaped that name
 Into the musing of the troubled king.⁶

⁵ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol I, pp. 40-1

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 42.

The human, half-divine, Hero — and the heavenly, yet half-human, Apsara: the confrontation in the poem is splendid, portentous, and presaging wonders yet to come. To divinise man, to humanise heaven, and to make them meet in close-breast: isn't this the consummation towards which the drama of the universe is racing? But, in the meantime, — in the "realm between", — there needs must be enacted false starts, failures, and fresh and ever fresh attempts to effect in the fulness of time the destined, if repeatedly deferred, marriage of Heaven and Earth.

The sky suddenly darkens, anarchy is seen advancing its ominous front, and the giant Cayshie looms immense in the "dim disguise of rain... filling the regions with himself". Urvasie is the intended victim of this sudden invasion, and "as the storm lifts the lily", Cayshie spirits her away. Pururavas, blazing with anger, storms after him, and the giant, realising that discretion is the better part of valour, drops her on the snow, and in discomfiture retires to the East. Pururavas kneels by Urvasie's side, long he kneels, silently drinking in her paradisaical beauty, and now he sets her in his chariot and starts homeward again:

And soon she moved. Those wonderful wide orbs
Dawned into his, quietly, as if in muse.
A lovely slow surprise crept into them
Afterwards; last, something far lovelier,
Which was herself, and was delight, and love.⁷

Their journey, however, is cut short by the other apsaras, and Tilottama reminds him of his great human worth and responsibility.

O King, or mortal mightier than the Gods!

⁷ *ibid* , p 42.

For Gods change not their strength, but are of old
 And as of old, and man, though less than these,
 May yet proceed to greater, self-evolved.
 Man by experience of passion purged,
 His myriad faculty of perfecting, widens
 His nature as it rises till it grows
 With God coterminous.⁸

This is a recurrent idea, an oft-repeated exhortation, in Sri Aurobindo's writings.⁹ Frail mortal man has nevertheless the promise of sovereignty, but if he is to gain it, he must first be willing to lose himself — to hush up desire — to enact the fiery meaning of Sacrifice. Pururavas understands and withdraws without a word; Urvasie joins her companions. Yet once more her eyes meet his across widening space — he staggers as one smitten — and "curving downwards on precipitate wheels", he reaches his palace in Ila's peaceful town at last.

Canto II takes us to high Indra's hall in heaven, where revels — the archetypes of our earthly arts — are in progress. Urvasie the supreme celestial dancer reveals inadvertently her infatuation for a mortal, and no wonder "a gust of laughter" rocks the assembled gods. But Bharat, Master of the Revels, sees his glorious art shamed and stained, and banishes Urvasie from "Swar-ga's streams and golden groves". Indra intercedes on her behalf, and Bharat is sufficiently mollified to set a natural limit to her exile from heaven. Escorted by Tilot-

⁸ *ibid*, p. 47

⁹ cf 'To the Sea' (*Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, pp 129-30) and 'The Life Heavens' (*ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 282-4). Also the prophecy in *Savitri* (pp. 784-5), 1954 Edition

The mind of earth shall be a home of light,
 The life of earth a tree growing towards heaven,
 The body of earth a tabernacle of God.

tama, Urvasie commences her journey to the earth, and visits bright and holy places still lost in thought, and chasing vain regrets and wayward hopes.

Now Pururavas too is a waif of fortune, self-exiled from Ila to "the infinite and lonely hills". The search after felicity is for him a mocking infelicity. In the sixth month of his travels, he manages to reach a silent awe-inspiring place:

Snow on ravine, and snow on cliff, and snow
Sweeping in strenuous outlines to heaven,
With distant gleaming vales and turbulent rocks,
Giant precipices black-hewed and bold
Daring the universal whiteness....¹⁰

Commenting on the first line above, K. D. Sethna writes: "the universal whiteness' (of the last line) is created for us by that word ('snow') beginning and ending the line as well as occupying its centre-foot. Again, the terminal 'snow' runs the line over to the next by its connection with the word 'sweeping' and sustains the idea of the icy continuity and ubiquitousness".¹¹ Pururavas climbs the summits, then comes down, and sits motionless, adding to the "surrounding hush".

For six days he thus sits in the posture of *tapas*, but gazing towards "the dim unfathomed gorge"; on the seventh day, Tilottama and Urvasie come through the gorge and approach him, his steadfastness in love drawing them towards him like a powerful magnet. Tilottama makes one more feeble attempt to wean away his thoughts from Urvasie, reminding him of his path of kingly glory. But he promptly declares that he cares neither for glory nor for far-off purity, for Urvasie is

¹⁰ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 54

¹¹ *The Poetic Genus of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 27.

more than all his worlds. Their great love is intense with uncontrollable longing:

he yearned towards her like a wave,
And she received him in her eyes as earth
Receives the rain.¹²

There is little more to say, and so Tilottama leaves the lovers together, having first stipulated the conditions attached to the union of Pururavas and Urvasie.¹³ They have long dreamt of each other, and they are now at last together — and she is clinging and shuddering:

She, o'erborne,
Panting, with inarticulate murmurs lay,
Like a slim tree half seen through driving hail,
Her naked arms clasping her neck, her cheek
And golden throat averted, and wide trouble
In her large eyes bewildered with their bliss.
Amid her wind-blown hair their faces met.
With her sweet limbs all his, feeling her breasts
Tumultuous up against his beating heart,
He kissed the glorious mouth of heaven's desire.
So clung they as two shipwrecked in a surge.¹⁴

Not Shakespeare, nor Donne, nor Rossetti could have achieved a completer, a more uninhibited, a more passionate evocation of love's fierce storm and its aftermath of fulfilled calm than in these whirling and hotly adequate lines.

Having won Urvasie, Pururavas can never have too

¹² *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol I, p. 57.

¹³ The principal condition is that his naked body should never be seen by her.

"Either a rapture she invisible
Or he a mystic body and mystic soul.
Reveal not then thy being naked to hers ." (p. 58).

¹⁴ *ibid* , p. 59.

much of her; they form a kind of closed universe where the leap of sensuous pleasure is alone the governing law. Some years pass, she becomes a mother, and tired of "soulless woods and waves" they return to "the virgin's city Ilian" and inaugurate a golden age:

The sacred city felt a finer life
Within it; burning inspirations breathed
From hallowed poets...
And from the city of Pururavas
High influences went.¹⁵

Seven years pass, and now the gods in heavens, missing Urvasie more and more, resolve to break the romance and get her back:

They in colossal council marble, said
To that bright sister whom she had loved best,
"Menaca!" crying "how long shall one man
Divide from heaven its most perfect bliss?
Go down and bring her back...."¹⁶

By means of a trick, the denizens of heaven, the Gandharvas, arrange to steal away the rams particularly beloved of Urvasie and disappear in a blindish rush of lightning. She cries out to Pururavas, and when he springs up from the bed, there is lightning again and she sees him —

all a grace of naked limbs,
The hero beautiful, Pururavas,
In that fierce light.¹⁷

Although owing to no fault of their own, the compact is broken, and Urvasie returns to heaven. She might come back before dawn, he thinks; but the dawn belies his hopes; "then he knew he was alone".

Pururavas is disconsolate. He leaves his kingdom, he

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 63 ¹⁶ *ibid*, p 63. ¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 66

seeks his beloved on hill and dale and glen and grotto
until he comes to the silence of the peaks and treads
regions "as vast and lonely as his love":

Then with a confident sublime appeal
He to the listening summits stretched his hands.
"O desolate strong Himalaya, great
Thy peaks alone with heaven and dreadful hush
In which the Soul of all the world is felt
Meditating creation!...
I come to you, O mountains, with a heart
Desolate like you, like you snow-sweet, and stretch
Towards your solemn summits kindred hands.
Give back to me, O mountains, give her back".¹⁸

And the Himalaya "bent towards him, white... seemed to recognise a soul/immense as they, reaching as they to Heaven/and capable of infinite solitude". In a massive piece of Nature description like this, where amplitude is doubled with intensity, where man and mountain achieve confrontation and communion, the poetry of apostrophe and pathetic fallacy reaches a dizzier height than ever. Moving now further north "past the supreme great ridges", moving through mists and seeing beyond rocks and ram-parts the golden sun, he sees enthroned upon the summit "Indira, the goddess, Ocean's child", the patroness of Aryasthan, and he tells her the name of his "termless wide desire", and "like a viol", she returns this prophetic reply:

Sprung of the moon, thy grandsire's fault in thee
Yet lives, but since thy love is singly great,
Doubtless thou shalt possess thy whole desire.
Yet hast thou maimed the future and discrowned
The Aryan people; for though Ila's sons,

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 74.

In Hustina, city of elephants,
 And Indraprasta, future towns, shall rule
 Drawing my peoples to one sceptre, at last
 Their power by excess of beauty falls, —
 Thy sin, Pururavas — of beauty and love:
 And this the land divine to impure grasp
 Yields of barbarians from the outer shores.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the unnatural inversion (a symptom of nineteenth-century versification) in the last two lines, the speech is charged with power and embodies a core of historical truth and eloquently utters a note of warning, as pertinent today as it was when Pururavas faced the austere goddess and patroness of Aryasthan.

But Pururavas wanders farther still, sights Coilas (Kailas) in the distance, receives benedictions from the Mother of the Aryans, and rising yet further sees the Mighty Mother herself on the peaks. The Mother knows that Pururavas, hero-man, is casting away his high destiny on earth for the pleasures of heaven:

Thou then hast failed, bright soul; but God blames
not

Nor punishes. Impartially he deals

To each strenuous spirit its chosen reward.²⁰

The desire that "wastes" his soul can be quenched only by Urvsie; he is therefore permitted to find his felicity in her arms:

But far below through silent mighty space

The green and strenuous earth abandoned rolled.²¹

He has won a kind of personal salvation, but only by retreating from his terrestrial sphere of service; he has failed his greater self, he has failed India, he has failed humanity.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 77. ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 80. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 82.

Even in this early poem, certain motifs of some of Sri Aurobindo's greatest poetry — life as a journey and a struggle, life as a scaling of great heights (higher still and higher), a resisting of (or succumbing to) temptations, an appreciation of the glory and sensual ecstasy of love and yet the call to beyond that glory and ecstasy to be able to serve a greater cause — all are already introduced. In the Chitrangada pieces (*Chitrangada* as well as *Uloupy*), written after *Urvasie* and perhaps also after *Love and Death*, Arjuna is for the time being a willing captive of the Manipur Queen, but both know in their heart of hearts that there are claims of greater concern than even Love. In *Uloupy*, Chitrangada is bold enough to face the logic of the situation and tell Arjuna where his stern duty lies (although it is a wrench for her to speak the words):

Hero, take up thy bow! Warrior, arise!
 Proceed with thy majestic mission. Thou
 From many mighty spirits was selected
 And mayst not for a transient joy renounce
 The anguish and the crown...²²

Although both the Chitrangada pieces have come to us only in a fragmentary condition, one would fain believe that it was Sri Aurobindo's intention to make the Chitrangada-Arjuna story a striking foil to the Urvasie-Pururavas story or that of Priyumvada and Ruru in *Love and Death*. It is also characteristic that the decisive move is taken by the Woman, Chitrangada, and not by Arjuna.

Apart from this underlying existential dialectic, which is unobtrusive enough so as not to stain the poetry, *Urvasie* has all the felicities of diction and style asso-

²² *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1964), p. 159.

ciated with epic poetry. Expanded similes, Nature descriptions, arrays of polysyllabic proper names, set eloquent speeches, all these are true to type; and the whole action ultimately hinges upon a Temptation, a temptation to which the Hero succumbs. It would be therefore not inappropriate to call *Urvasie* an epic or an epyllion. If the Temptation gives the poem a sense of unity and wide human interest, the strings of proper names and the elaborate similes make the poem aesthetically satisfying. Here we have no more than a catalogue of names, and yet the result is exquisitely exotic poetry:

So danced they numberless as dew-drops gleam,
Menaca, Misracayshie, Mullica,
Rumbha, Nelabha, Shela, Nolinie,
Lolita, Lavonya and Tilottama, —
Many delightful names....²³

Again, doesn't an expanded simile like the following reproduce, and more than reproduce, the appositeness as well as exuberance of typical epic similes:

As when a child falls asleep unawares
At a closed window on a stormy day,
Looking into the weary rain, and long
Sleeps, and wakes quietly into a life
Of ancient moonlight, first the thoughtfulness
Of that felicitous world to which the soul
Is visitor in sleep, keep her sublime
Discurtained eyes; human dismay comes next,
Slowly; last, sudden, they brighten, and grow wide
With recognition of an altered world,
Delighted; so woke *Urvasie* to love.²⁴

Urvasie is the work of a young man; if it has youth's boldness, idealism, intuition of romantic imagery and

²³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 40. ²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 45-6.

feeling for language, it has also something of youth's excess. For a long time, Sri Aurobindo was dissatisfied with it ("I got disgusted with it and rejected it", he wrote in 1933), and wasn't anxious to save it from oblivion; but happily he was persuaded to include it in the Collected Edition of his Poems and Plays in 1942.²⁵ *Urvasie* is Sri Aurobindo's *Endymion*, but an *Endymion* transferred, by sleight of hand, to Aryasthan and presented in terms of immemorial Hindu thought. By rendering the age-long *Urvasie* legend on an epic (at least mini-epic) scale, Sri Aurobindo has dyed it with shining indelible purpose and crowned it with racial and prophetic significance. Its wealth of sensuous elaboration, its luxuriance in colour and sound, its high-arching epic similes, its resounding polysyllabic proper names, its subtle fusion of personal and national perspectives, its forceful delineation of the drama of man's temptation and fall, its suggestion of the filiations between earth and heaven — these divers "marks" of Sri Aurobindo's *Urvasie* make it no small achievement in the difficult genre of Romantic Epic.

II

Love and Death, which followed *Urvasie*, was written when Sri Aurobindo was twenty-seven; somewhat shorter than *Urvasie*, it runs to about 1,000 lines and is not divided into cantos. According to Sri Aurobindo it was written "in a white heat of inspiration during 14 days of continuous writing — in the mornings, of course"; and he adds: "I never wrote anything with such ease and

²⁵ *Life—Literature—Yoga*, p. 122.

rapidity before or after".²⁶ The story is taken from the *Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, but Sri Aurobindo has changed the name of the heroine from Pramadvura to Priyumvada. The story has its affiliations also with the Hellenic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. But Sri Aurobindo has transformed the original tale, and *Love and Death* sweeps on its course with a precipitancy all its own.

Ruru, Sage Bhriгу's grandson, loves Priyumvada, daughter of Menaca the nymph and the Gandharva King. It is a beautiful Adam-Eve idyll out of an Indian Garden of Eden (the serpent, of course, not far away):

In woodlands of the bright and early world
 When love was to himself yet new and warm
 And stainless, played like morning with a flower
 Ruru with his young bride Priyumvada
 Fresh-cheeked and dewy-eyed white Priyumvada
 Opened her budded heart of crimson bloom
 To love, to Ruru; Ruru, a happy flood
 Of passion round a lotus dancing thrilled,
 Blinded with his soul's waves Priyumvada.
 To him the earth was a bed for this sole flower,
 To her all the world was filled with his embrace.²⁷

Next follow two or three pages of almost the apotheosis of sensuous poetry; the lovers are so very very happy that Ruru laughs towards the sun and cries:

how good it is to live, to love!
 Surely our joy shall never end, nor we
 Grow old, but like bright rivers or pure winds
 Sweetly continue, or revive with flowers,
 Or live at least as long as senseless trees...²⁸

But no; Priyumvada is suddenly stung by a snake, she

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁷ *Collected Poems and plays*, Vol I, p. 85.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 88.

pales with a pitiful cry, she collapses on the ground:
Ruru rushes to her side —

As he came,
He saw a brilliant flash of coils evade
The sunlight, and with hateful gorgeous hood
Darted into green safety, hissing death.²⁹

Priyumvada's dying speech is touching in its lingering helplessness:

I have had so little
Of joy and the wild day and throbbing night,
Laughter and tenderness, and strife and tears.
I have not numbered half the brilliant birds
In one green forest, nor am familiar grown
With sunrise and the progress of the eves,
Nor have with plaintive cries of birds made friends,
Cuckoo and rainlark and love-speak-to-me.³⁰

As yet unreconciled to the event, she is borne away to "some distant greenness", and night descends upon Ruru and his soul is now synonymous with the "great silence".

Although overcome by grief, Ruru will not tamely sink under it; rather will he go in quest of this new "secrecy terrific, darkness vast" that has come in the shape of Death, and he will confront its gloom and perhaps wrest from It or Him the life lately snatched away. He wanders in the forests, recapitulating moments of his life with Priyumvada, "measuring vast pain in his immortal mind". His silent agony impresses and even frightens the gods, and Agni asks the *uswutt*-tree (Aswatta) to divert Ruru's wrathful anguish; but the tree's amateurish attempt only infuriates Ruru who promptly casts a curse on it. Moving on and on, Ruru recalls memories and experiences that both hold promises to the ear and

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 89. ³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

break them to the heart. He regrets the unreasoning anger he had directed against the well-meaning tree, whereas he had been impotent when the snake had stung Priyumvada! Who, who would take him now to the dim portal leading to Death himself? Ruru will confront him — whatever the consequences.

Coming presently to a green opening, Ruru sights “a golden boy half-naked, with bright limbs all beautiful”. Isn’t he Kama “who makest many worlds one fire”? Kama’s answer is one of the supremely great passages in the poem:

I am that Madan who inform the stars
With lustre and on life’s wide canvas fill
Pictures of light and shade, of joy and tears,
Make ordinary moments wonderful
And common speech a charm: knit life to life
With interfusions of opposing souls
And sudden meetings and slow sorceries:
Wing the boy bridegroom to that panting breast,
Smite Gods with mortal faces, dreadfully
Among great beautiful kings and watched by eyes
That burn, force on the virgin’s fainting limbs
And drive her to the one face never seen,
The one breast meant eternally for her.
By me come wedded sweets, by me the wife’s
Busy delight and passionate obedience,
And loving eager service never sated,
And happy lips, and worshipping soft eyes:
And mine the husband’s hungry arms and use
Unwearying of old tender words and ways,
Joy of her hair, and silent pleasure felt
Of nearness to one dear familiar shape.
Not only these, but many affections bright

And soft glad things cluster around my name.
 I plant fraternal tender yearnings, make
 The sister's sweet attractiveness and leap
 Of heart towards imperious kindred blood,
 And the young mother's passionate deep look,
 Earth's high similitude of One not earth,
 Teach filial heart-beats strong These are my gifts
 For which men praise me...³¹

But Kama can send forth "fiercer shafts" too — jealousy, revenge, violence, "mad insatiable longings pale", passions, lusts! He is omnipotent almost, almost, — for he is powerless against Death, and hence his very godhead becomes a lacerating doubt.

The enchanting airs of paradisaal sensuality first, then — towards the end of the long passage — the chill blasts of infernal sexuality: Kama's magnificent speech comprises both; all Eden, all hell, and the earth between. Love is an altogether new dimension of experience, defying reason, defying cold calculation, defying even death, it sharpens and purifies the senses, it is a sixth sense that controls the rest; it awakens the slumbering psyche and crowns him master of the ceremonies. And yet, when things go wrong, love changes to hate, heaven dwindles to hell, and love's ecstasy becomes jealousy, hatred, death. An inspired passage surely, for this was certainly not drawn from experience, but the poet's eye does roll in a fine frenzy of intuitive understanding, glances from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth, and gives to the intangible motions of a lover's life, whether in fair weather or foul, the form, voice and colouring of actuality. Sri Aurobindo himself, when he was pressed to state his own opinion of this passage decades after he

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 97-8.

had written it, said without mincing words:

I do not think I have, elsewhere, surpassed this speech in power of language, passion and truth of feeling and nobility and felicity of rhythm all fused together into a perfect whole. And I think I have succeeded in expressing the truth of the godhead as Kama, the godhead of vital love (...I mean the love that draws lives passionately together or throws them into or upon each other) with a certain completeness of poetic insight and perfection of poetic power...³²

Although Kama confesses to a certain helplessness in dealing with Death, he nevertheless offers Ruru a ray of hope; he could proceed to the nether world and redeem Priyumvada from "immitigable death" — but only on one fearful condition:

Life the pale ghost requires: with half thy life

Thou mayest protract the thread too early cut...

Would it be wise to enter into a contract of this remorseless nature with pitiless Death?

O Ruru, lo, thy frail precarious days,

And yet how sweet they are! simply to breathe

How warm and sweet!... Wilt thou yield up, O lover,

Half thy sweet portion of this light and gladness,

Thy little insufficient share, and vainly

Give to another?³³

Of course, he will; and so he journeys in a "white-winged boat" steered by "a sole silent helmsman" to the ocean, and exhorts her to make way for his mortal tread. A mortal undoubtedly, yet a Rishi's son, and great Bhṛigu's grandson; the sea cannot altogether ignore

³² *Life—Literature—Yoga*, p. 117.

³³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 100.

him, and in fact the sea makes a wondrous response:
 And like a living thing the huge sea trembled,
 Then rose, calling, and filled the sight with waves,
 Converging all its giant crest; towards him
 Innumerable waters loomed and heaven
 Threatened. Horizon on horizon moved
 Dreadfully swift; then with a prone wide sound
 All Ocean hollowing drew him swiftly in,
 Curving with monstrous menace over him.
 He down the gulf where the loud waves collapsed
 Descending, saw with floating hair arise
 The daughters of the sea in pale green light,
 A million mystic breasts suddenly bare,
 And came beneath the flood and stunned beheld
 A mute stupendous march of waters race
 To reach some viewless pit beneath the world.⁸⁴

First the journey from the Ganges to the ocean: a white-winged boat, a helmsman with dumb and marble face: water, water, everywhere, and the skies mingling with the water: an all-night rowing and gliding down, and in the morning, "the vast sea all grey": the apostrophe to the ocean, and the ready response! It is a unique piece of imaginative writing, and unlike Kama's speech which, thrillingly vivid as it is, only describes the name and nature and motions of Love, here in the 'Descent to Hell (Patala)' passage, we *see* things actually happening, and we become almost participants in the action. It may, perhaps, be said that this 'descent' into Hell is more Greek than Hindu, recalls vaguely Hades and Tartarus and the Circles in Dante than the legendary Patala of Indian mythology. Nevertheless, merely as a poetic projection of other worlds — or nether worlds —

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

the passage must rank among the most unforgettably vivid in the entire Sri Aurobindo canon.

Ruru's faltering steps take him to the hopeless, the immutable country, Patala, and he becomes aware of strange and hideous shapes, and he comes at last to a world of mad or maddened human voices, and pale faces, and princes, priests, and women too:

Then Ruru, his young cheeks with pity wan,
Half moaned: "O miserable race of men,
With violent and passionate souls you come
Foredoomed upon the earth and live brief days
In fear and anguish, catching at stray beams
Of sunlight, little fragrances of flowers;
Then from your spacious earth in a great horror
Descend into this night, and here too soon
Must expiate your few inadequate joys..."³⁵

Patala has its mansions too, many regions, divers gradations of suffering, and Ruru makes his dismal progress; at one place his human heart half bursts with the "burden of so many sorrows", and he understands "that terrible and wordless sympathy of dead souls for the living"; and moving further on, and his passage not obs-

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 106. In the course of a letter to Prema Nandakumar, Mr. K. D. Sethna has compared this passage from *Love and Death* with the following passage from Tennyson's *Idyls*:

O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves,
By taking true for false, or false for true,
Here, thro' the feeble twilight of this world
Groping, how many, until we pass and reach
That other, where we see as we are seen. .

Sethna adds that, while Sri Aurobindo's "take-off" is Tennysonian, "immediately he soars up into an intoxicating ozone and his touch-down is still with 'trailing clouds of glory'".

tructed because of his great lineage, he approaches the throne of Hades. There are muttered exclamations and explanations; there are giant dogs, four-eyed and mysterious; and there is Yama himself whom Ruru confronts at last.

Once more a Temptation Scene breathlessly unfolds itself before us. Pururavas was willing to abandon his kingly dharma on earth in order to rejoin Urvasie in heaven; Ruru likewise is ready to give up the mature "fruitbearing" years of his life in return for Priyumvada's life. Like Goddess Luxmie in *Urvasie* who regrets the Hero's failure to live up to the Aryan ideal of King, Yama too is overcome by disappointment. Neither Luxmie nor Yama actually plays the role of a Tempter; rather do they place the alternatives squarely before Pururavas and Ruru, who are alike poised on the crest of the dread predicament "Either — Or". In vain Yama tries to persuade Ruru to give up Priyumvada; in vain he expatiates on the privileges of old age.

Yet thou bethink thee, mortal,

Not as a tedious evil nor to be
Lightly rejected gave the gods old age,
But tranquil, but august, but making easy
The steep ascent to God. Therefore must Time
Still batter down the glory and form of youth
And animal magnificent strong ease,
To warn the earthward man that he is spirit
Dallying with transience, nor by death he ends,
Nor to the dumb warm mother's arms is bound,
But called unborn into the unborn skies.³⁶

Ruru should not forget that youth is but half the story; he should not lightly renounce the latter half of his life.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. III.

On the contrary, he should grow old wisely living the full quota of his appointed life, and wax

divine with age,

A Rishi to whom infinity is close,

Rejoicing in green wood or musical shade

Or boundless mountain-top where most we feel

Wideness....³⁷

Ruru even catches the vision splendid, "the dawn of that mysterious Face and all the universe in beauty merge"; and yet—he will not accept the promised Felicity; he would give back, in Ivan Karamazov's deadly expression, "the ticket". It is Priyumvada he wants, and he must have her back; the rest is nothing—less than nothing—to Ruru.

Ruru is now once again in the world of common sight and sound, Priyumvada is alive and is by his side.

For many moments comforting his soul

With all her jasmine body sun-ensnared

He fed his longing eyes... She stretched

Her arms up, yearning, and their souls embraced;

Then twixt brief sobbing laughter and blissful tears,

Clinging with all her limbs to him, "O love,

The green green world! the warm sunlight!" and

ceased,

Finding no words; but the earth breathed round them,

Glad of her children and the koil's voice

Persisted in the morning of the world.³⁸

Love's labour's won! But the victory—is it only a defeat in disguise? In one sense, Pururavas and Ruru—the former by beyonding earth's confines to find his felicity in the world above, the latter by penetrating to the den

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 113 ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 115.

of Yama in the underworld to rescue lost Priyumvada and bring her back to the earth — both of them attain their heart's desire, setting at nought every other consideration. Yet isn't a King — isn't a Rishi — a forerunner too? Doesn't he carry in his grasp, not his own happiness merely, but the future destiny of the race as well? In this sense, Pururavas the Kshatriya and Ruru the Brahmin Rishi have both failed. Of either of them it might be said, modifying Goldsmith's lines on Burke:

Born for the universe, he narrowed up his mind,

And to himself gave what was meant for mankind.

It was not Satan, nor Achitophel, nor Manthara, nor Iago that tempted Pururavas or Ruru; they were but betrayed by the infinitesimal egoistic false within themselves. The Temptation was enacted, in the last resort, only in the theatre of their souls, and it is the more dramatic and significant for that very reason.

Written in 1899, first published in a journal in 1921, reprinted as a book in 1924, *Love and Death* had the "misfortune" to appear at a time when a different aesthetic atmosphere — conditioned by *Prufrock*, *The Waste Land* and the later Yeats — prevailed in England. But, perhaps, the fashion of anti-romanticism has passed already, and it should be possible now at least to recognise in *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* truly indubitable poetic creations in the epic genre.

III

If *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* are romances or romantic epics, *Baji Prabhou* is quite obviously a heroic poem. Like *Vidula*, *Baji Prabhou* also was written during the period of active political life, and first appeared,

not long after, in February-March 1910 in the *Karmayogin*; but it was during his stay at Baroda that Sri Aurobindo first received the impact of the story, drawn from Maratha history.

Baji Prabhou is a story of Maratha heroism that, in effect, must have struck its readers when it first appeared as a veritable salvo of patriotism. It could be called an epic fragment if not a mini-epic in itself, and the story is told with a breathlessness and power of language that are of a piece with its sanguinary theme.

Following the Western epic tradition, Sri Aurobindo will not give us a moment's respite, but fairly plunges — *in medias res* — into the middle of things. After fighting a disastrous battle, Shivaji is in hot retreat, with the enemy in close pursuit.

Silently with set
And quiet faces grim drew fighting back
The strong Mahrattas to their hills; only
Their rear sometimes with shouted slogan leaped
At the pursuer's throat, or on some rise
Or covered vantage stayed the Mogul flood
A moment. Ever foremost where men fought,
Was Baji Prabhou seen, like a wild wave
Of onset or a cliff against the surge.
At last they reached a tiger-throated gorge
Upon the way to Raigurh. Narrowing there
The hills draw close ...³⁹

Shivaji, in dire extremity, entrusts to Baji Prabhou the defence of that crucial gorge. Baji accepts the charge with an eloquent asseveration of his faith:

not in this living net
Of flesh and nerve, nor in the flickering mind

³⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 102

Is a man's manhood seated. God within
 Rules us, who in the Brahmin and the dog
 Can, if He will, show equal godhead. Not
 By men is mightiness achieved; Baji
 Or Malsure is but a name, a robe,
 And covers One alone. We but employ
 Bhavani's strength, who in an arm of flesh
 Is mighty as the thunder and the storm.⁴⁰

Shivaji goes back to Raigurh to bring reinforcements,
 leaving Baji and his fifty men to guard the pass. Presently the enemy is sighted in the distance —

a mingled mass,
 Pathan and Mogul and the Rajput clans,
 All clamorous with the brazen throats of war
 And spitting smoke and fire.⁴¹

But the determined group of defensive Marathas hurls
 back wave upon wave of enemy detachments; and still
 they come, wave after wave —

They came, they died; still on the previous dead
 New dead fell thickening. Yet by paces slow
 The lines advanced with labour infinite
 And merciless expense of valiant men.⁴²

And so Sri Aurobindo describes the vicissitudes of this
 modern Thermopylae with remorseless particularity, with
 the suspense mounting moment by moment. The Pathan
 infantry, "a formidable array"; the "hero sons" of Rajas-
 than who are the "playmate of death"; the chivalrous
 sons of Agra — they all come, one horde after another,
 with the stern determination to force the pass, regardless
 of expense; and in the result —

the fatal gorge
 Filled with the clamour of the close-locked fight.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p 104.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 105

⁴² *ibid.*, p 106.

Sword rang on sword, the slogan shout, the cry
 Of guns, the hiss of bullets filled the air,
 And murderous strife heaped up the scanty space,
 Rajput and strong Mahratta breathing hard
 In desperate battle.⁴³

The narrative proceeds through the shocks of the battle, the alternations between horror and heroism, and there is a thrilling if inhuman precipitancy in the recordation of the seesaw of the grapple. Numbers seem to tell at last; Baji's bullets fail, and all his store of shot and powder is nearly exhausted. But Baji undaunted cries:

Make iron of your souls.
 Yet if Bhavani wills, strength and the sword
 Can stay our nation's future from o'erthrow
 Till victory with Shivaji return.⁴⁴

While thus the afternoon mellows into evening, Baji's men continue to fight with fanatic courage and desperate determination against "Agra's chivalry glancing with gold"; and Maratha mountaineers prove ultimately more than a match for the city-dwellers of Agra:

So fought they for a while; then suddenly
 Upon the Prabhou all the Goddess came.
 Loud like a lion hungry on the hills
 He shouted, and his stature seemed to increase
 Striding upon the foe. Rapid his sword
 Like lightning playing with a cloud made void
 The crest before him....⁴⁵

The assault peters out, and soon another starts, but this time the Goddess withdraws from him, his real work being over:

And passing out of him a mighty form
 Stood visible, Titanic, scarlet-clad,

⁴³ *ibid*, p 108. ⁴⁴ *ibid*, p 110. ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 112.

Dark as a thunder-cloud, with streaming hair
 Obscuring heaven, and in her sovran grasp
 The sword, the flower, the boon, the bleeding head, —
 Bhavani. Then she vanished....⁴⁶

A sword now finds out Baji's shoulder, "sharp a Mogul lance ran grinding through his arm". Mortally wounded, yet Baji is but broken — not bent. The battle rages as wild as ever, Baji's fifty men are reduced to a mere fifteen. Not minding his own wound, Baji charges the enemy for the last time, "like a bull with lowered horns that runs", the Mogul wall yields again, but now eight men alone are left, and none unwounded. Already, however, Shivaji is back with a formidable force, and the Raigurh lances glisten in the "glory of the sinking sun". Baji with the accession of Bhavani's strength has indeed saved the situation, although only three of the defenders are now left:

Then suddenly

Baji stood still and sank upon the ground.
 Quenched was the fiery gaze, nerveless the arm:
 Baji lay dead in the unconquered gorge.
 But ere he fell, upon the rocks behind
 The horse-hooves rang and, as the latest left
 Of the half-hundred died, the bullets thronged
 Through the too narrow mouth and hurled those down
 Who entered .
 The Mogul rout began. Sure-footed, swift
 The hostile strength pursued, Suryaji first
 Shouting aloud and singing to the hills
 A song of Ramdas as he smote and slew.⁴⁷

But Shivaji himself stands silent by Baji's prone body,

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

and a vision — terrible and inspiring at once — overwhelms and sustains him:

But Shivaji beside the dead beheld
A dim and mighty cloud that held a sword
And in its other hand, where once the head
Depended bleeding, raised the turban bright
From Baji's brows, still glittering with its gems,
And placed it on the chief's. But as it rose
Blood-stained with the heroic sacrifice,
Round the aigrette he saw a golden crown.⁴⁸

Written in blank verse that is "granite in its suggestion of strength and at the same time as brightly flexible and resonant as a Damascus blade"⁴⁹, *Baji Prabhou* has a vigour and precision of phrasing and a sheer energy of movement appropriate to the life and death struggle in the "tiger-throated gorge". The exordium is this arresting description of midday:

A noon of Deccan with its tyrant glare
Oppressed the earth, the hills stood deep in haze,
And sweltering athirst the fields glared up
Longing for water in the courses parched
Of streams long dead;⁵⁰

and the poem closes at the moment when death is turned into victory, and Baji Prabhou becomes, by the very act of losing his life, an heir to immortality. The poem is thus rich in tragedy and triumph, and it both ennobles and exalts the subject.

In *Sri Aurobindo*, Baji Prabhou has indeed found a minstrel worthy of his imperishable sacrifice; but the poet has carefully refrained from diminishing the stature or the heroism of Baji's antagonists: Pathan, or Rajput,

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p. 115. ⁴⁹ K. D. Sethna, *Sri Aurobindo—The Poet*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol II, p. 101.

or Mogul, the enemy is brave, even as the defending Maratha is, but Baji out-tops them all and his fifty men feel charged by his own sovereign strength of purpose. Sri Aurobindo seems to say — though he does not say it in so many words — that whoever would save his soul must be first prepared to lose his life for a worthy cause; sacrifice offered at the altar of a noble ideal is alone the true gateway to the soul's freedom and immortality. By dying, Baji Prabhou really won a deathless place for himself in the annals of his motherland, and he will for ever live in men's memories and bosoms. And a country that would redeem itself and live greatly needs heroes of the stamp of Baji Prabhou who can break through the shell of the ego and live a larger, richer and nobler life.

There is also the potent suggestion that it is really Bhavani — Bharat Shakti — that takes charge of the situation, invades and possesses Baji with her invincible strength, and accomplishes the miraculous rout of the Mogul and Rajput hordes. There is the further suggestion that, behind Shivaji's incomparable leadership of the Marathas, there was also Ramdas's spiritual power and personality. Suryaji sings a song of Ramdas while smiting and slaying the enemy. In his moment of victory, Shivaji is humble before Baji's dead body but is reconciled to the event by the Vision that is vouchsafed to him. *Baji Prabhou* is a great heroic poem touched with religious symbolism. It is thus a stirring paean of patriotism that is also a song of adoration of Bhavani Bharati.

CHAPTER SIX

DRAMAS OF CONFLICT AND CHANGE

I

In his early years at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo's creative inspiration flowed easily into the moulds of translations from Sanskrit and Bengali, and lyric and narrative poetry. *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*, for example, took the romantic epic as far as it could go — and it was to great heights indeed. The scaling of high heaven in *Urvasie*, the descent into Hell or Patala in *Love and Death*, the fight for the mountain pass in the later *Baji Prabhau*: one would almost think that, between them, are comprehended the essence of Paradise, Inferno and Purgatorial Earth

But the demiurge that was Sri Aurobindo's poetic energy sought other avenues too for forceful self-expression. After the two early romantic narratives, Sri Aurobindo wrote his first full-length play in blank verse, *Perseus the Deliverer*, "somewhere between the end of the nineties and the first years of the following decade".¹ It was, however, published only in 1907, in the columns of the weekly edition of the *Bande Mataram*. When the play was being reprinted in 1942 in *Collected Poems and Plays*, Sri Aurobindo added just one passage towards the end "with what seems a prophetic eye to the development of the contemporary phenomenon of Hitler".²

Many years after Sri Aurobindo's passing on 5 De-

¹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol I, Publisher's Note.

² K D Sethna, *Sri Aurobindo—The Poet*, p. 349.

cember 1950, four other early plays (*The Viziers of Bassora*, *Rodogune*, *Vasavadutta* and *Eric*) and three unfinished plays (*The House of Brut*, *The Maid in the Mill* and *Prince of Edur*) were published, first in *Sri Aurobindo Annual* year after year and later in book form. *The Prince of Mathura*, an earlier version of *Prince of Edur*, and two dramatic pieces of his student days — *The Witch of Ilni* and 'Fragment of a Drama' (a dialogue between Achab and Esar) — are now included in Volume 7 of Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library Edition. *The Viziers of Bassora*, in spirit and style an early work for which Sri Aurobindo seems to have had a "special fondness" even in later years, was supposed to have disappeared, along with many other early writings, "into the unknown in the whirlpools and turmoil of my (Sri Aurobindo's) political career".³ But by a quirk of fate, they came to light, after all. Along with other papers and manuscripts, the play had been seized by the police in 1908, and kept in the Record Room of the Court till 1936, when under the rules the papers were to be destroyed or sold away as waste matter. But thanks to the intelligence and initiative of the record-keeper, the papers — although shown as destroyed — were preserved in a corner of the room and then, in 1949, placed in safe custody in a steel cupboard in the Judge's own retiring room. A careful examination was made in 1951, and almost all the writings of Sri Aurobindo which he had thought lost for ever were now discovered — and, among them, two complete dramas in English.⁴ One of these was *The Viziers of Bassora*; the other, presumably, was *Rodogune*.

³ *Life—Literature—Yoga*, p. 122

⁴ Appendix to *The Viziers of Bassora* (pp. 201-2).

The Viziers of Bassora — called “A Dramatic Romance” — was published in 1959. *Rodogune*, obviously a later play, was published posthumously in 1958; it seems to have been a companion piece to *Perseus the Deliverer*. As now published, *Rodogune* is a richer and weightier and loftier — though not a more enjoyable — play than *The Viziers*, most of which is pure fun.

Vasavadutta, surviving in several versions, seems last to have been revised by Sri Aurobindo in 1916. But its conception, and its first draft, probably belong to the Baroda period. It was published only in 1957. *Eric* — another dramatic romance — seems to have been written in 1912 or 1913, but it too had its early gestation in the Baroda period, as its theme and style certainly show affiliations with the other plays.

Of the dramatic fragments, *Prince of Edur*, written in 1907, was published in 1961; only two Acts are available, and the rest were probably never written. The first Act and part of the second Act of *The Maid in the Mill* and a scene from *The House of Brut* were published in *Sri Aurobindo Annual* in 1962, and both belong to the Baroda period.

Five completed plays, and a few unfinished plays: an impressive bulk surely! A prejudiced critic might dismiss it all as “sapless pseudo-Elizabethan drama”; on the other hand, an enthusiastic critic might exclaim: “How Elizabethan! how entirely Shakespearian!” These are really dramas of life and love, of conflict and change: of conflict that is at the heart of life, of change that is the result of the dialectic of the conflicting opposites — of ‘thesis’ and ‘antithesis’! Sri Aurobindo was thinking and poetising and dramatising at once: he was looking at life steadily and in its totality, he was also peering into the

future, throwing out suggestions, hinting at possibilities, invoking inspiring visions of the future. Like the poems, the dramas too were a part of Sri Aurobindo's life: the outer projections of the richer or quintessential part of his life — the imponderables of his "inner" life.

II

Perseus the Deliverer is something of a *tour-de-force* — for it asked for not a little boldness on Sri Aurobindo's part to embark upon this adventure of rendering a Greek myth in the language of modern thought⁵ — that satisfies us as drama, as poetry, and also as an imaginative presentation of the ideas of evolution and progress. Perseus, the heroic hero of ancient Hellas, is portrayed in this play as a veritable hero indeed, but a hero who also inaugurates a forward movement in the history of humanity as the result of participating in a monumental clash of mighty opposites; and in him we are made to see "the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his (Man's) ultimate destiny to become".⁶ The conflict in the play is both individual and cosmic; and the conflict is waged in different ways and on different levels. Cepheus, King of Syria, is pitted against Polydaon, priest of Poseidon; Pallas Athene is pitted against Poseidon (Olympians though both of them are) — it is Wisdom against brute Force; one might almost say, the Devas are waging a bitter war against the Asuras!

⁵ The reader is referred to the present writer's "Andromeda" (*Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1948) for a historical study of the Perseus-Andromeda myth from Euripides to Sri Aurobindo

⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 174.

Sri Aurobindo thus conceives the conflict as being somewhat in the nature of a Hegelian dialectic. Man shall progress indeed, as he has already progressed so much along the corridors of the past, but only if he is still prepared to brave and to ride successfully on the crests and cusps, the checks and counterchecks, that inevitably punctuate his life. Evil and anarchy and seeming defeat cannot for ever bar man's onward march; Pallas therefore hurls this deathless challenge at Poseidon.

Therefore I bid thee not,
O azure strong Poseidon, to abate
Thy savage tumults: rather his march oppose.
For through the shocks of difficulty and death
Man shall attain his godhead.⁷

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Heraclitean maxim — "all is flux, nothing is stationary" — is by itself not very helpful or consoling; what Heraclitus, on the contrary, really tells us is just this: "all indeed comes into being according to strife, but also all things come into being according to Reason, *kat erin* but also *kata ton logon*".⁸ It is this expanded Heraclitean message that finds eloquent expression in the last lines of Sri Aurobindo's play:

CASSIOPEA.

How can the immortal gods and Nature change?

PERSEUS.

All alters in a world that is the same.
Man most must change who is a soul of Time;
His gods too change and live in larger light.

CEPHEUS.

Then man too may arise to greater heights?
His being draw nearer to the gods?

⁷ *ibid*, p. 179

⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus* (1941), p. 62.

PERSEUS.

Perhaps.

But the blind nether forces still have power
And the ascent is slow and long is Time.
Yet shall Truth grow and harmony increase:
The day shall come when men feel close and one.
Meanwhile one forward step is something gained,
Since little by little earth must open to heaven
Till her dim soul awakes into the Light.⁹

Here can be seen the germs of the thought that was later to grow in pith and volume and fill the great expanses of *The Life Divine*. Reality — ultimate Reality — is both a fact of Being and the dynamics of Becoming. From a foundation of inherent possibility, the evolutionary urge releases a spring that leaps towards the New, and from the height so achieved and the wideness gained, a compulsion to change and a fresh integration become possible. All things may pass and change in the drama of Becoming, yet all things have their subsistence only in the truth of Being. It is in these terms that one has to interpret the struggle between the sea-monster and the Deliverer in Sri Aurobindo's play.

But of course *Perseus the Deliverer* is essentially a play of action, full of the turbulence and uncertainty of a human as well as a cosmic conflict, and peopled by a whole host of characters many of whom are striking in their individualities. While the dialogues are as a rule admirable in their organisation and effective in their articulation, Sri Aurobindo's art excels itself particularly in the great blank verse passages that accurately evoke the terrible plight of an Andromeda chained to the cliff, the insane inflated blood-lust of a Polydaon revelling in

⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 306.

images of horror, or yet the radiant serenity, the confident strength and the prophetic aura of a Perseus.

Although the "heroic" characters — Perseus, Cassiopea, Andromeda, Iolaus, and the rest — are vividly and boldly enough delineated, it is Polydaon, Priest of Poseidon, that fearfully dominates the play, which may almost be called *The Tragedy of Polydaon*. As in Shylock's character, in Polydaon's also one can see both ludicrous and tragic traits. For a brief spell, Polydaon is an instrument of destiny; he is puffed up with arrogant self-importance, he is irresistible and invincible in his own and even in the people's eyes. The circumstances that make it possible for such a man as Polydaon to reach such heights of power, and the unexpected turn that suddenly blasts that power and breaks the man, constitute the theme of this drama of terror and pity, of conflict and change, and power and Grace.

There is a background drama, and there is the foreground drama, and they have their intimate filiations too. Poseidon and Pallas Athene, symbolising Power and Grace respectively, decide to fight it out through their terrestrial representatives, the subhuman sea-monster and the superhuman Perseus. The human intermediaries are Andromeda who is incarnate compassion and Polydaon who is an engine of vengeful cruelty and spite. In the ancient Syria of this play, it is the local religious custom to sacrifice shipwrecked strangers to Poseidon in his temple. When the play opens, two such — the merchants Tyrnaus and Smerdas — are rescued from a shipwreck by Perseus who has witnessed the wreck from the air. Presently they are surrounded by Prince Iolaus and his soldiers, the Prince explaining that they have to be offered to the "long dry altar" of ivory-limbed Poseidon.

The merchants are apprehended, but Iolaus feels inclined to let Perseus go because he hasn't come by the sea but by the air. Polydaon arrives with Phineas King of Tyre and orders the arrest of Iolaus himself. But when Perseus shakes his uncovered shield, the soldiers fall back and even Polydaon recognises "the fiery-tasselled aegis of Athene" and concludes that, at least for the present, discretion is the better part of valour. Perseus and Iolaus become friends, but when the Prince invites him to the palace, Perseus merely says:

I have a thirst for calm obscurity
And cottages and unambitious talk
And simple people. With these I would have rest,
Not in the laboured pomp of princely towns
Amid pent noise and purple masks of hate.
I will drink deep of pure humanity
And take the innocent smell of rain-drenched earth,
So shall I with a noble untainted mind

Rise from the strengthening soil to great adventure.¹⁰

When Andromeda, Iolaus' sister, comes to know of the sungod and of the fate of the two shipwrecked men, she twice asks her brother to release them ("You will not save them?"... "Will you not save them, brother?"), and when he says "I cannot", she answers with simple finality: "Then I will".¹¹ In collusion with the King of Tyre, Polydaon now complains to King Cepheus about Iolaus' disobedience and demands his head for Poseidon. The King tries to bribe Polydaon, but in vain; and Phineas proposes a compromise that Iolaus shall produce Perseus in court. Iolaus is content but is amused as well:

I laugh to see wise men
Catching their feet in their own subtleties.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 194. ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 204.

King Phineas, wilt thou seize Olympian Zeus
And call thy Tyrian smiths to forge his fetters?
Or wilt thou claim the archer bright Apollo
To meet thy human doom, priest Polydaon?
'Tis well; the danger's yours. ¹²

The wily Phineas hopes, with Polydaon's help, to eliminate Iolaus, marry Andromeda and rule over Syria (as well as Tyre).

In Act III, Andromeda is about to go on her chosen errand when Pallas Athene appears to her to sustain her in her noble purpose. Reaching the temple, she finds that one of the men, Tyrnaus, has been released, but the despicable Smerdas is still in chains, his inveterate selfishness being the cause. But Andromeda exclaims:

Why, we have all so many sins to answer,
It would be hard to have cold justice dealt to us.
We should be kindly to each other's faults
Remembering our own. Is't not enough
To see a face in tears and heal the sorrow,
Or must we weigh whether the face is fair
Or ugly? I think that even a snake in pain
Would tempt me to its succour, though I knew
That afterwards 'twould bite me! But he is a god
Perhaps who did this and his spotless radiance
Abhors the tarnish of our frailer natures. ¹³

Notwithstanding Andromeda's act of compassion and grace, Smerdas can only bleat about his lost gems, but Tyrnaus is deeply moved and kneels to her in gratitude:

O human merciful divinity,
Who by thy own sweet spirit moved, unasked,
Not knowing us, cam'st from thy safe warm chamber
Here where Death broods grim-visaged in his home

¹² *ibid.*, p 213. ¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 226-7.

To save two unseen, unloved, alien strangers...
 There shall be some divine epiphany
 Of calm sweet-hearted pity for the world,
 And harsher gods shall fade into their Hades.¹⁴

Andromeda's "sacrilege" rouses Poseidon himself who frightens and maddens Polydaon into megalomaniac postures. On being captured and brought before Polydaon, Smerdas confesses that Perseus and Iolaus released Tyrnaus, and Andromeda himself. When all are assembled, Polydaon declares that Andromeda, "accursed of impious sacrilege", must die. Cassiopea, the mother in her in a blaze of anger, tries to accuse Polydaon in turn, but Andromeda defiantly admits, "I alone am guilty". Cassiopea has to seek the help of her Chaldean Guard to retire from the temple to the safety of the Palace.

Now Poseidon bestirs himself and lets loose a tidal wave on the city, with the sea-monsters causing untold havoc among the people. Therops the mobocrat joins hands with Polydaon, organises the people, and demands Andromeda's death so that the city may be saved from Poseidon's wrath.

In a lucid moment of self-examination, King Cepheus confides to his Queen:

If I had listened to thee, O Cassiopea,
 Chance might have taken a fairer happier course...
 I thought I better knew my Syrian folk.
 Is this not my well-beloved people at my door,
 This tiger-hearted mob with bestial growl,
 This cry for blood to drink, this roar of hate?
 Always thou spok'st of the temple's power,
 A growing danger menacing the State,
 Its ambition's panther crouch and serpent pride

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 228.

And cruel craft in a priest's sombre face.
 I only saw the god and sacred priest.
 To priest and god I am thrown a sacrifice.
 The golden-mouthed orator of the market-place,
 Therops, thou bad'st me fear and quell or win
 Gaining his influence to my side. To me
 He seemed a voice and nothing but a voice.
 Too late I discern that human speech has power
 To change men's hearts and turn the stream of Time.
 Thy eyes could read in Phineas' scheming brain.
 I only thought to buy the strength of Tyre
 Offering my daughter as unwilling price.
 He has planted my fall and watches my agony.
 At every step I have been blind, have failed.¹⁵

The sight of such blood-lust in her beloved people —
 the cries, the curses — pains Andromeda even more than
 imminent death. And already Polydaon's frenzy of vault-
 ing ambition frightens Therops:

How shall we bear this grim and cruel beast

For monarch, when all's done! He is not human.¹⁶

Left alone, Polydaon feels the swell of future possibilities,
 he gesticulates more and more wildly, and "his madness
 gains upon him". Oh, he will do such things, such terri-
 ble things; he will revel in death and destruction; he will
 make crimson rivers irrigate Syria's gardens; he will fill
 them with heads instead of lilacs:

The world shall long recall King Polydaon.

I will paint Syria gloriously with blood.

Hundreds shall daily die to incarnadine

The streets of my city and my palace floors,

For I would walk in redness.... Hecatombs

Of men shall groan their hearts out for my pleasure

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 256. ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 266.

In crimson rivers...

Nobles and slaves, men, matrons, boys and virgins

At matins and at vespers shall be slain

To me in my magnificent high temple

Beside my thunderous Ocean...

I am a god, a mighty dreadful god,

The multitudinous mover of the sea...

Sit'st thou, my elder brother, charioted

In clouds? Look down, O brother Zeus, and see

My actions! they merit thy immortal gaze.¹⁷

The last Act. Andromeda is chained to the cliff on the seaside, and as she awaits the monster of the deep, she speaks words that lash and lacerate, yet — coming from her — they are distillations and vibrations of pure love:

O iron-throated vast un pitying sea...

I am alone with thee on this wild beach

Filled with the echo of thy roaring waters.

My fellowmen have cast me out: they have bound me

Upon thy rocks to die... My bosom

Hardly contains its thronging sobs; my heart

Is torn with misery: for by my act

My father and my mother are doomed to death,

My kind dear brother, my sweet Iolaus,

Will be cruelly slaughtered; by my act

A kingdom ends in miserable ruin.

I thought to save two fellowmen: I have slain

A hundred by their rescue I have failed...

Heaven looks coldly on.

Yet I repent not. O thou dreadful god!

Yes, thou art dreadful and most mighty; perhaps

This world will always be a world of blood

¹⁷ *ibid* , pp 266-7

And smiling cruelty, thou its fit sovereign.
But I have done what my own heart required of me,
And I repent not...

Yet I had dreamed of other powers. Where art thou,
O beautiful still face amid the lightnings,
Athene? Does a mother leave her child?
And thou, bright stranger, wert thou only a dream?
Wilt thou not come down glorious from thy sun,
And cleave my chains, and lift me in thy arms
To safety?...¹⁸

Perseus comes indeed, and the horror — the grisly beast — is slain, and Andromeda is free and is in the sungod's arms.

Elsewhere Polydaon is busy condemning Iolaus, Cepheus and Cassiopea to death, but at the nick of time Perseus intervenes:

Syrians, I am Perseus,
The mighty son of Zeus and Danae.
The blood of gods is in my veins, the strength
Of gods is in my arm: Athene helps me...
What I have done is by Athene's strength...
I have dashed back the leaping angry waters;
His Ocean-force has yielded to a mortal.
Even while I speak, the world has changed around you.
Syrians, the earth is calm, the heavens smile;
A mighty silence listens on the sea...¹⁹

Polydaon makes one more attempt to assert his power, but his frenzy is ended, he foams and totters and falls to the ground, and mutters out his frustrations and dies acknowledging the brilliant new God. It is left to Perseus to indite the megalomaniac's epitaph:

¹⁸ *ibid* , pp. 273-4.

¹⁹ *ibid* , pp. 285-6.

This man for a few hours became the vessel
 Of an occult and formidable Force
 And through his form it did fierce terrible things
 Unhuman: but his small and gloomy mind
 And impure dark heart could not contain the Force.
 It turned in him to madness and demoniac
 Huge longings. Then the Power withdrew from him
 Leaving the broken incapable instrument,
 And all its might was spilt from his body. Better
 To be a common man mid common men
 And live an unaspiring mortal life
 Than call into oneself a Titan strength
 Too dire and mighty for its human frame,
 That only afflicts the oppressed astonished world,
 Then breaks its user.²⁰

This particular passage was a later addition when the play was being published in the collected edition of 1942, and evidently Sri Aurobindo had then "a prophetic eye to the development of the contemporary phenomenon of Hitler".²¹ More pointedly, Sri Aurobindo had written about Hitler in October 1939:

A Titan Power supports this pigmy man,
 The crude dwarf instrument of a mighty Force...
 Too small and human for that dreadful Guest,
 An energy his body cannot invest, —
 A tortured channel, not a happy vessel,
 Drives him to think and act and wrestle.
 Thus driven he must stride on conquering all,
 Threatening and clamouring, brutal, invincible,

²⁰ *ibid*, pp. 290-1

²¹ K. D. Sethna, *Sri Aurobindo—The Poet*, p. 349.

Perhaps to meet upon his storm-swept road
A greater evil — or thunderstroke of God.²²

The similarities between the two passages are obvious enough and point to the same inspiration, Hitler-Polydaon! As for Perseus, he is divine-human throughout, but he is the instrument used by Pallas to substitute, in the place of the terrible old-Mediterranean god of the sea, a humaner god, Olympian and Greek, whom even Polydaon recognises and salutes in the end.

There is an anti-climax too. When Phneas and his soldiers make a last attempt to contain Perseus, they are all turned to stone by the power of the Gorgon's Head that the sungod brings into play:

...those swift charging warriors stiffened
To stone or stiffening, in the very posture
Of onset, sword uplifted, shield advanced,
Knee crooked, foot carried forward to the pace,
An animated silence, life in stone.

And so — thanks to Athene — all's well that rounds off well.

Seen from one angle, Perseus is a belated "Elizabethan" play, packed with variegated incident, and marked by the rush and riot of full-blooded action. Seen from another angle, it is a fresh rendering of the Perseus-Andromeda myth, linking Sri Aurobindo with other interpreters of the myth like Euripides and Ovid, Corneille and Kingsley. Unlike Kingsley, whose *Andromeda* is but "romantic tinsel", Sri Aurobindo has retained all the old beauty and poetry and sense of mystery of the Hellenic myth, but has served it all up with a modern flavour and relevance and urgency. The theme is still

²² *More Poems* (1957), pp. 57-8.

the rescue of Andromeda from the sea-monster, but Sri Aurobindo's heroine is no passive helpless creature like the Andromeda of Euripides, Ovid and Kingsley, but a heroine in her own sovereign right of self-determined action. Paramount in her eyes are the laws of humanity and pity: these only she will acknowledge, these alone will guide her actions. She is thus a heroine cast in the mould of Antigone, who dares to defy Kreon's might rather than submit to outrageous injustice, and is very different from the traditional Andromeda who is more akin to Iphigenia, the innocent maiden sacrificed by her father to propitiate the wrath of Artemis. In *Perseus the Deliverer*, the kernel of the action lies, not in Andromeda's passive sufferance as in the earlier renderings of the myth, but in her active defiance of the powers of evil. And, in a way, she was the beginning of the road that was to take Sri Aurobindo ultimately to Savitri.

As regards the tragedy of Polydaon, an Indian analogy — though the parallel shouldn't be pushed too far — may serve to explain both the sudden inflation of force and the no less sudden collapse. Parashurama was an *avatar* of God. He was for a time the vessel of the immortal Spirit. But when he encountered Rama at last, the Spirit withdrew from Parashurama and flowed into the younger vessel. In *Perseus* too, the eclipse of Polydaon is necessary to effect a forward move in evolution. The age of Polydaon is dead, a new fair age, mild and merciful, is born in its place. Zeus and Athene wrest primacy from Poseidon, — and Poseidon himself secures a seat at an Olympian height. (This, again, looks like a distant foreshadowing of the transformation, in *Savitri*, of Death into a god of Light!) The future, however, is with man, for man may rise high — albeit

his way is strewn with shocks and traps — and draw his being close to the Divine.

When one at last closes *Perseus the Deliverer*, one carries in one's memory the imprint of many striking gestures and many richly human faces, but one particular face and gesture stands out especially radiant, — sun-curled Andromeda defying man and god alike, and releasing Chaldean Smerdas. Pity is nobler than revenge, charity diviner than justice. When man or beast turns irremediably evil or stupendously futile, it must become extinct even as the mammoths of old have so become; and this is, perhaps, the inner meaning of the Medusa stare. Power in the person of Perseus and Pity in Andromeda's (or Power and Grace) make the ideal combination which alone can realise, here and now, a "young uplifted race" that is human, humane, wise and happy.

III

From *Perseus the Deliverer* to *The Viziers of Bassora* — it is like turning from the storm-tossed ocean ruled by Poseidon to the Palace of Marvels in Haroun al Rashid's Garden of Delight. And the source is not Hellenic myth or Euripides or Corneille but the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*. Sri Aurobindo won the book as a school prize in England, and seems to have loved it. *The Viziers* is principally based on 'The Tale of the Beautiful Sweet-Friend', a delightful yarn that Shahrazad spins out over nearly six nights.²³ Sri Aurobindo,

²³ Vide Prema Nandakumar's 'The Viziers of Bassora: A Study' in *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, Twenty-Third Number (1967), pp. 40-58.

however, introduced a few changes in the story and added some new characters as well, partly to purify the story of some of its pruriency and partly to underline the principle of contrast in the characterisation.

Alzayni, King of Bassora, has two Viziers — the good Ibn Sawy and the evil-minded Almuene. Their sons, Nureddene and Fareed, are another contrasting pair: while both are given to reckless ways, whereas Nureddene is handsome and has a frank and open nature, Fareed is crooked in body as well as mind. On the King's behalf, Ibn Sawy buys a slave-girl, Anice-aljalice, but later acquiesces in her romance with his son, Nureddene — a romance half-promoted by Doonya, the fun-loving, frolicksome, but good-natured niece of the Vizier. Doonya and Anice-aljalice make another pair, equally quick-witted, equally open-hearted, and equally expert in the language of romance and gaiety:

DOONYA (leaping on Anice).

What's your name,

You smiling wonder, what's your name? Your name?

ANICE-ALJALICE.

If you will let me a little breathe, I'll tell you.

DOONYA.

Tell it me without breathing.

ANICE-ALJALICE.

It's too long.

DOONYA.

Let's hear it.

ANICE-ALJALICE

Anice-aljalice.

DOONYA.

Anice,

There is a sea of laughter in your body;

I find it billowing there beneath the calm
And rippling sweetly out in smiles. You beauty!
And I love laughs.²⁴

Nureddene is a creature of romance too, as may be inferred from his words to his mother, Ameena:

I shall go forth, a daring knight-errant,
To my true country out in faery-land;
Wander among the moors, see Granada,
The delicate city made of faery stone,
Cairo, Tangier, Aleppo, Trebizond;
Or in the East, where old enchantment dwells,
Find Pekin of the wooded piles, Delhi
Of the idolaters... everywhere

Catch Danger by the throat where I can find him...²⁵

Having, although with a great show of reluctance, agreed to Nureddene throwing in his lot with Anice, Ibn Sawy decides to go away for a time, and so he divides his property between his son and his wife with the best of reasons (as he confides to her):

... 'tis likely that the boy,
Left here in sole command, will waste his wealth
And come to evil. If he's sober, well;
If not, when he is bare as any rock,
Abandoned by his friends, spewed out by all,
It may be that in this sharp school and beaten
With savage scourges the wild blood in him
May learn sobriety and noble use:

Then rescue him, assist his better nature...²⁶

His words prove prophetic, and Nureddene squanders away his money in no time. Anice-aljalice is no less to blame, as Doonya charges her:

²⁴ *The Viziers of Bassora* (1959), pp. 32-3

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 40. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 68.

Is there a bright
 Unnecessary jewel you have seen
 And have not bought? a dress that took your fancy
 And was not in a moment yours? Or have you lost
 A tiny chance of laughter, song and wine,
 Since you were with him?²⁷

Anice is duly contrite, and tries to make amends. The time for reckoning comes soon enough, and Nureddene finds himself high and dry like Timon:

What next? Shall I, like him of Athens, change
 And hate my kind? Then should I hate myself...²⁸

But it is not his nature to hate. When even Murad, Doonya's husband, declines to help, Anice suggests that she may be sold in the slave-market. The sale, however, is not effected, but Nureddene has a chance to belabour the 'bad' Vizier. Before Almuene is able to arrest Nureddene, he escapes to Bagdad with Anice. There at once their native gaiety returns:

ANICE.

This is Bagdad!

NUREDDENE.

Bagdad the beautiful,
 The city of delight. How green these gardens!
 What a sweet clamour pipes among the trees.

ANICE.

And flowers! the flowers! Look at these violets
 Dark blue like burning sulphur! Oh, rose and myrtle
 And gilliflower and lavender; anemones
 As red as blood! All spring walks here in blossoms
 And strews the pictured ground.

NUREDDENE.

Do you see the fruit,

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 79. ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 96.

Anice? Camphor and almond-apricots,
Green, white and purple figs and these huge grapes,
Round rubies or quite purple-black, that ramp
O'er wall and terrace; plums almost as smooth
As your own damask cheek...²⁹

There is elaborate wine-drinking and singing in the company, first of Ibrahim the Caliph's Superintendent, and later of the Caliph himself who joins them disguised as a fisherman. The Caliph quickly seizes the situation, makes a pretence of "buying" Anice from Nureddene, sends him with a letter to Alzayni King of Bassora, and then, throwing off his disguise, plays his legendary role and reassures Anice:

I am the Caliph
Men call the Just. Thou art safe with me
As my own daughter. I have sent thy lord
To be a king in Bassora, and thee
I will send after him with precious robes,
Fair slavegirls, noble gifts...³⁰

The scene now shifts to Bassora in Act V. When Nureddene brings the Caliph's letter, although Alzayni is inclined to follow the instructions implicitly, Almuene calls the letter a forgery and throws the bringer into prison. Nureddene is about to be executed when the Caliph's Vizier, Jaafer, arrives and prevents the crime. Alzayni and Almuene are both seized, and the Caliph too comes soon after. Ibn Sawy is back, Anice rejoins Nureddene, and Bassora wakes up to a series of new times. Once again, Haroun al Rasheed plays the good and benevolent Caliph:

Sit all of you.

This is the thing that does my heart most good

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 127. ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 163.

To watch these kind and happy looks and know
 Myself for cause. Therefore, I sit enthroned,
 Allah's vicegerent, to put down all evil
 And pluck the virtuous out of danger's hand.³¹

The Caliph in *The Viziers* has been compared, not inappropriately, with the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, for he too is "masked Providence", and claims to be "Allah's vicegerent". Nureddene bids fair to prove a good King of Bassora, for he has graduated through the school of misfortunes without losing the innate goodness of his heart or his sanguine temperament. And it is a rather chastened and a little more worldly-wise Anice-aljalice that will stand by his side. Ibn Sawy, Doonya, Murad and the rest will also help him in his new responsibilities. But the Caliph's parting advice must prove auspicious too:

Fair children worthy of each other's love
 And beauty! ...Meanwhile remember
 That life is grave and earnest under its smiles,
 And we too with a wary gaiety
 Should walk its roads, praying that if we stumble,
 The All-Merciful may bear our footing up
 In His strong hand, showing the Father's face
 And not the stern and dreadful Judge.³²

The Viziers was described by Sri Aurobindo "a Dramatic Romance", but it is perhaps even more of a romantic comedy. If the blank verse is full of lightness and grace, the prose has wit and sparkle and the savour of earthiness. And as for the songs that Anice-aljalice sings in the Pavilion of Pleasure, they breathe the spirit of Illyria and the Forest of Arden:

King of my heart, wilt thou adore me,

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 198. ³² *ibid.*, p. 200.

Call me goddess, call me thine?
I too will bow myself before thee
As in a shrine.

Till we with mutual adoration
And holy earth defeating passion
Do really grow divine.³³

Even the drunken Ibrahim waxes into song (the lines
distantly recalling the Clown's Epilogue in *Twelfth
Night*):

When I was a young man,
I'd a very good plan;
Every maid that I met,
In my lap I would set,
What mattered her age or her colour?

But now I am old
And the girls they grow cold -
And my heartstrings, they ache
At the faces they make,
And my dancing is turned into dolour.³⁴

And as for the women, "they are splendid" In Prema Nandakumar's words, "Doonya's sparkle and Anice's sweetness make the play a legend of likeable women. Indeed, it is a legend of good women as well, for the other ladies too — Ameena, Khatoon, and the slaves Balkis and Mymoona — are graceful, wise and affectionate towards one and all".³⁵ Above all, the poetry of the play — poetry full of the commercial imagery of the slave-market and even of the fish-market — the poetry is the play.

For the rest, it is not necessary to discover in the

³³ *ibid.*, p. 147. ³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 155-6.

³⁵ *Sri Aurobindo Circle* (XXIII Number, 1967), p. 52.

play any deep "purpose", except that youth, beauty, love, charity, poetry, wit, humour are among the great blessings of life, and to foster them — not misuse them — is the way of wisdom. Knavery like Almuene's is ultimately a form of stupidity, for he progressively isolates himself, he brings ruin to all with whom he associates, and he is hated by all. The story of the two Viziers, Ibn Sawy and Almuene, and of their sons, Nureddene and Fareed, can almost be read as a Morality Play; but no! the poetry of the play and the comic spirit that presides over it will permit no such critical excrescence.

IV

Like *Perseus*, Sri Aurobindo's third play, *Rodogune*, is also located in Syria — but the Syria of history, not of legend.³⁶ In Appian's History of the Syrian Wars, there is reference to a Cleopatra, the wife first of Demetrius Nicanor King of Syria (162 B. C.), then of his brother Antiochus. When taken prisoner by the Parthian King, the latter's sister Rodogune marries the captive Nicanor. In revenge, Cleopatra marries his brother, Antiochus, who later commits suicide after an unsuccessful war. On his return to Syria, Cleopatra kills Nicanor, and then kills her first son Seleucus, and is herself forced to drink poison by her second son, Antiochus Grupus. Justin, another historian, mentions a Queen who is required to choose one of her sons to succeed her late husband. Out

³⁶ For a full discussion of the play, the reader is referred to Prema Nandakumar's '*Rodogune* A Study' in *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, Twenty-Second Number (1966), pp 38-93.

of these and other references and hints, the French dramatist, Corneille, wrote his famous tragedy, *Rodogune*. The two princes, the twins Antiochus and Seleucus, who have been brought up abroad at Cleopatra's brother's place, return to Syria expecting that one of them would be named the first-born to ascend the vacant throne. Rodogune, Nicanor's betrothed (not his wife, as in Ap-pian), is a prisoner, and both the brothers fall in love with her. But Cleopatra hates Rodogune as a young rival, and Rodogune hates Cleopatra for having killed Nicanor. The moves and counter-moves are swift and sharp. Cleopatra tells her sons that whoever kills Rodogune would be declared the first-born and become King. Rodogune tells her suitors that whoever kills Cleopatra could claim her hand. Now Antiochus tells Rodogune that it was for her to kill one of the rivals and marry the other! But this last move brings out the real Rodogune, who has love — not hate — in her heart. It is now 'check!' everywhere, and so Cleopatra acts on her own. she poisons Seleucus, and tries to poison Antiochus, but instead — her crime being discovered — drinks out of the poisoned cup herself and dies with a terrible curse on her lips for her surviving son and Rodogune:

Reign! Crime hath followed crime, and thou art king!
I rid thee of thy father, of thy brother,
And of myself. May heaven let its vengeance
Fall on your heads, making you both its victims
In payment for my deeds. May ye in marriage
Find naught but horror, jealousy and strife..³⁷

Sri Aurobindo had read the Euripidean and Corneillian versions of the Andromeda legend, and he had likewise read Appian and Corneille's *Rodogune*. But the play he

³⁷ *ibid.*, quoted on p. 47.

wrote was no mere rendering but a transmutation of the earlier versions of the story. In Sri Aurobindo's play, Cleopatra doesn't kill her husband; Rodogune is neither the second wife of the late Demetrius Nicanor nor one betrothed to him, but merely a captive princess; there is, at the beginning, no uncompromising feud or rivalry between Cleopatra and Rodogune, and neither of them delivers to the brothers, Antiochus and Timocles (Seleucus in Corneille), the awful command "Kill and..." Sri Aurobindo greatly humanises Cleopatra and turns Rodogune into a near-angel. On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo introduces two venomous characters, Phayllus the Chancellor (he might be a new version of Almuene) and his sister Cleone. The brothers, Antiochus and Timocles, are presented as a study in contrast, not just two equally upright young men loving one another. At first, while Antiochus is austere and 'heroic', Timocles is open-hearted and hedonistic; but in the course of the play, the differences are worked up to the point of murderous animosity by the wily Chancellor and his sister whom he frankly calls "the good bitch". Sri Aurobindo seems to have distributed most of Cleopatra's cold criminality between Phayllus and Cleone. Corneille's tragedy was reared on the classical principles of concentration and rigid symmetry, but Sri Aurobindo's play opts for Romantic extension and the calculus of probabilities.

Act I opens with the death of the unloved King Antiochus, "I loved him not, — who did?" Eunice asks Cleone, both ladies in waiting. There is also a reference to Rodogune, whom Cleone dislikes but Eunice loves:

She has roses in her pallor, but they are
The memory of a blush in ivory.
She is all silent, gentle, pale and pure,

Dim-natured with a heart as soft as sleep.³⁸

Eunice also reports the dying King's words to his Queen:

Call thy sons! Before they come

I shall have gone into the shadow. Yet

Too much exult not, lest the angry gods

Chastise thee with the coming of thy sons

At which thou now rejoicest.³⁹

The two brothers — Rodogune viewed differently by the contrasted girls, Eunice and Cleone — the dying King's prophecy or warning to Cleopatra within a couple of pages, so much has been insinuated already!

On her first appearance, Cleopatra speaks of the eighteen years she has been separated from her sons by her late "hateful husband", and thrills with joy at the thought of the coming reunion.

There is a diphyony of music swells

Within me and it cries a double name,

Twin sounds, Antiochus and Timocles...⁴⁰

In her speech of dramatic retrospective narration, she makes an affectionate reference to her first husband, Nicanor, and how she was driven to marry Antiochus — "a reason of State, an act of policy". As she awaits the arrival of her sons, Phayllus and his sister exchange confidences and plan to trap the heart of whoever may be declared King.

On their return to Syria, the first reactions of the brothers differ sharply, underlining their temperamental differences. The manly and heroic Antiochus thinks of his step-father the late King as "a glorious sun", but Timocles thinks rather of his mother of whom he has long dreamed in Egypt during the dreary years of exile. While Timocles is effusive ("Mother, my sweet mother"),

³⁸ *Rodogune* (1958), p. 3. ³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 2. ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 8

Antiochus (like Cordelia) is formal: "Madam, I seek your blessing". Cleopatra reacts to this not unlike King Lear, and she is not unwilling — as slyly advised by Cleone — to name Timocles, not Antiochus, the new King.

There are quick developments. While Phayllus and Cleone scheme to make the most of their opportunities, Timocles madly falls in love with Rodogune, though she has no eyes for any but Antiochus. She is dazed by the developing circumstances and confides thus to Eunice:

Was Fate not satisfied
With my captivity? Waits worse behind?
It was a grey and clouded sky before
And bleak enough but quiet. Now I see
Fresh clouds come stored with thunder toiling up
From a black-piled horizon.⁴¹

And summoned by Antiochus (on a pretext), she hears with unbelieving wonderment and sudden joy his declaration of love and offer of marriage and answers simply, "I am thine, thine, thine, thine for ever". It is a high — perhaps the highest — moment in the play when Antiochus tells her.

Hide not thy face from love. The gods in heaven
Look down on us; let us look up at them
With fearless eyes of candid joy and tell them
Not Time nor any of their dooms can move us now.
The passion of oneness two hearts are this moment
Denies the steps of death for ever.⁴²

The brothers, now rivals in love, fall out quickly, thereby presenting Phayllus and his sister the chance to intervene in their own interests

The truth about the first-born of the twins is known

⁴¹ *ibid* , p 52. ⁴² *ibid* , p. 60.

only to Cleopatra and Mentho the nurse. Cleopatra would now like to hide the fact that Antiochus is the elder, and seeks Mentho's connivance. When the nurse asks incredulous "Can truth die?", Cleopatra answers:

Ah, Mentho, truth! But truth
Is often terrible. Justice! but was ever
Justice yet seen upon the earth? Man lives
Because he is not just and real right
Dwells not with law and custom but for him
It grows by whose arriving our brief happiness
Is best assured and grief prohibited
For a while to mortals.⁴³

Unused to such subtleties and sophistries, Mentho flares up in anger and boldly speaks out:

The God demands my voice.
I tell thee then that thy rash brain has hatched
A wickedness beyond all parallel,
A cold, unmotherly and cruel plot..⁴⁴

In Act III, when all are assembled in the Audience Chamber, Cleopatra proposes peace with Parthia, but Antiochus and his friends will have none of it. Then Cleopatra announces that Timocles is King, being the first-born. Many are incredulous, and Mentho will not be silenced when she says:

I will not be silent. She offends the gods.
I am Mentho the Egyptian, she who saw
The royal children born. She lies to you,
O Syrians. Royal young Antiochus
Was first on earth.⁴⁵

The rival supporters start fighting, but Antiochus persuades them to stop; he will be no party to "fratricidal murder" but will prefer "the heroic steps of ordered

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 69. ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 70. ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 83.

battle". With Rodogune and Eunice, he and his supporters quickly move out of Antioch, leaving Timocles and Cleopatra in possession of the city. That Rodogune should have preferred to follow Antiochus to the desert is most galling to Timocles, and he starts whining:

All, all's for him and ever was. I have had
 Light loves, light friends, but no one ever loved me
 Whom I desired. So was it in our boyhood's days,
 So it persists. He is preferred in heaven
 And earth is his...⁴⁶

He keeps away from Cleopatra, leaves the affairs of State to others, and solaces himself with Cleone. Phayllus constantly feeds him with evil counsel, and once or twice he feebly rebels: "Silence, thou tempter!" .. "I'll not be tempted by thee"; and once, in a moment of lucidity, he cries, "What furies out of hell have I aroused within, without me!" But the mood passes, and he sinks deeper still into the mire. The thought of Rodogune maddens him more and more, deprives him of his sanity, and drives him to his doom.

Although outnumbered, Antiochus is able to turn the course of the civil war in his own favour. But when the Parthian King (Phraates, Rodogune's father) comes down with a big force, Antiochus has his heart-searchings: should he fight the invader or make common-cause with him against Timocles? He is in a Coriolanus-predicament:

The Parthian treads our land!
 Phraates' hooves dig Grecian soil once more!
 The subtle Parthian! He has smiled and waited
 Till we were weak with mutual wounds and now
 Stretches his foot towards Syria. Have I then
 Achieved this only, my country's servitude?

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p. 91.

Shall that be said of me? It galls, it stabs.
 My fame! "Destroyer of Syria, he ended
 The great Seleucus' work". Whatever else
 Overtake me, in this the strong gods shall not win.
 I will give up my body and sword to Timocles,
 Repel the Parthian...

He must save Syria and then, perhaps, die... yet death
 needn't be the necessary consequence. There are countries
 enough to conquer, the world is larger than Syria:

Is it not more heroic

To battle with, than to accept calamity?
 Unless indeed all thinking-out is vain
 And Fate our only mover. Seek it out, my soul,
 And make no error there. ⁴⁷

His followers question the wisdom of his decision, but acquiesce in it all the same. On the one hand, by this action, Antiochus wins the admiration of the people and regains Cleopatra's love. On the other hand, he places himself (and all whom he loves) in the unscrupulous hands of Phayllus who is the real power in Antioch. But Timocles can think only of Rodogune, he has no use for Cleone that "harlot... rose-faced beauty", he foams at the thought of Antiochus and Rodogune sharing the same couch. In this mad mood he gives power to Phayllus to "try and sentence" Antiochus. Phayllus does a quick job, and his man, Theras, does the killing. Eunice and Rodogune, and Cleone and Nicanor, come too late, and Rodogune — like Lear after Cordelia's death — falls dead on dead Antiochus' body. Timocles is disowned by all, including his mother, old Nicanor takes charge of the situation and condemns Phayllus to death. With slowly awakening sanity, Timocles reminisces sadly:

⁴⁷ *ibid*, pp. 116-7.

Brother, brother,
 We did not dream that all would end like this,
 When in the dawn or set we roamed at will
 Playing together in Egyptian gardens,
 Or in the orchards of great Ptolemy
 Walked with our arms around each other's necks
 Twin-hearted. But now unto eternity
 We are divided....⁴⁸

Perseus, The Viziers, Rodogune: one cannot imagine three plays by the same author more different from one another than these; yet one can also mark the evolution of certain types, the recurrence of certain situations. The bad and mad combination in Phineus-Polydaon is repeated with a difference in Almuene-Fareed and again in Phayllus-Timocles. Beauty and goodness and the genius for loving and inspiring love are exemplified in Andromeda, Anice-aljalice and Rodogune, and all are caught helplessly in the coils of destiny. It needs the aegis-armed superhuman Perseus to redeem Andromeda, it needs masked Providence in the person of the Caliph to extricate Anice from her difficulties; but there is none to save Rodogune from her tragic fate. Even so, Timocles envies the dead lovers their Elysian bliss:

I must live for ever
 Unfriended, solitary in the shades;
 But thou and she will lie at lease inarmed
 Deep in the quiet happy asphodel
 And hear the murmur of Elysian winds
 While I walk lonely.⁴⁹

Rodogune is a maturer play, partly because it is cast successfully in the tragic mould, and partly because there is here significant character-development. Cleo-

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p 161 ⁴⁹ *ibid*, p 161.

patra, Antiochus, Timocles, Rodogune: none of them is the same at the end as they are at the beginning of the play. There is a change for the better, and in Timocles there is a change for the worse. Even Cleone shows good impulses towards the end. Only Phayllus is the "abhorred and crooked devil" throughout: an Aurobindonian version of Iago. Rodogune and Antiochus grow continually, she from the beautiful but helpless captive princess of the first Act to the heroic sublime of the last, and he from an egoistical hero as fighter to a patriot who can lose himself in something larger than his ego. The introduction of the Eremite — who appears twice during Antiochus' campaigns — may appear a little puzzling at first. Like the Soothsayer in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the Eremite too tries to undermine Antiochus' overweening self-confidence. On the second occasion, when he tells the hero —

Despise not proud defeat, scorn not high death.

The gods accept them sternly...

Depart and be as if thou wert not born.

The gods await thee in Antioch...⁵⁰

he almost shows Antiochus the way of acceptance, of submission to the will of the gods. The hero must seek his peace by subordinating his actions to the will of the gods. And that is what Antiochus does, and for him — as for Rodogune — death is but the gateway to the final victory that has eluded them in their star-crossed life. It may be added that it is the Shakespearian largeness of canvas of the play (as compared with Corneille's) that gives Sri Aurobindo abundant scope to delineate his characters on the basis of complexity and development reflecting the realities of life whereas Corneille imposes

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp 118-9.

an artificial clarity and consistency on his principal characters.

Unlike the two earlier plays, there is in *Rodogune* a surge of monstrous unnatural behaviour that can be purified only through the fire of tragic katharsis. Mother against children and children against mother, brother against brother, daughter against father (Eunice and Nicanor), even sister against brother (Cleone and Phayllus), civil strife, brother-murder — all Hell verily is let loose. Commenting on the 'imagery' of the play, Prema Nandakumar writes:

In our epic *Ramayana*... Vali and Sugriva fight for a kingdom and a girl. Did something of the Vali-Sugriva atmosphere enter the play? Was the 'bestial nature' of the blood-feud the cause of the animal imagery in the play? *Rodogune* is a study of blood-feud and perverted blood relationships. Its imagery is derived from blood, fire and the animal kingdom. . we literally lave in 'blood' and burn in 'fire', the one to show the 'body' of man and the other the 'spirit'. Antiochus is associated with the former, and *Rodogune* with the latter.⁵¹

The words recur and reverberate: "will not this blood stop flowing?"... "The blood? Let the gods have it"... "a red libation" .. "Slowly to burn away in crimson fire" . "as if a fire had clutched thee by the robe"! As for the fratricidal war which fills half the play or more, its cumulative horror is suggested by constant recourse to animal, reptile or bird imagery: snake, lion, cub, moth, mongrel, weasel, locust, wasp, fish, butterfly! "The three worlds make a compact whole: the overhanging worlds of the gods, the visible world of men, and the coiled

⁵¹ *Sri Aurobindo Circle* (XXII Number, 1966), p. 81.

bestial world".⁵² Of all his dramatic creations, *Rodogune* is undoubtedly the most inclusive, the most poignant, the most Shakespearian.

V

In *Eric* (described as 'A Dramatic Romance'), which comes next in order of conception and execution, the scene shifts to ancient Norway. But Syria or Norway, Bagdad or Avunthie (in *Vasavadutta*), it makes little difference to the dramatist himself. What Sri Aurobindo wrote about *Perseus* is, in fact, amenable to a more general application:

In a romantic work of imagination of this type... Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger; fantasy reigns sovereign; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get an easy admittance, ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle; myth, romance and realism make up a single whole".⁵³

Sri Aurobindo probably took his 'fable' from old Norwegian history, but it is what he has made of the story in *Eric* — how he has imparted universality to it — that really matters to us.

Eric is set in the 'Heroic Age' of Norway when the many petty kingdoms and earldoms were engaged in suicidally striving with one another, resisting the emergence of national unity under one dominant Ruler. After the death in battle of Olaf Thorleikson of Trondhjem, the

⁵² *ibid.*, p 84

⁵³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, pp. 173-4.

young Eric gets the better of Olaf's son, the intrepid Swegn, and is elected King of Norway. But Swegn refuses to accept a subordinate position, and decides to continue the fight from his snowy fastness in the hills.

Having won the first round in the war, Eric's problem is to win the peace as well. On the other hand, although he cannot win, Swegn will not accept defeat either. It is the perfect stalemate. His sister, Aslaug, thinks she can solve the problem for Swegn by going in disguise to Eric's court and bringing about his death. But Swegn's wife, Hertha, is more anxious to effect an honourable reconciliation between him and Eric. Behind the scenes, the gods too — Odin, Thor, and Freya — are active, and seem to be inclined to intervene in the terrestrial action, causing confusion to the human actors. It is this tangle of forces and clash of personalities that Sri Aurobindo has made the material of his fascinating dramatic romance.

When the play opens, Eric is already King of Norway. Force of arms followed by popular election has made him King, but he is inly gnawed by doubts. What has been won by force might be lost too — tomorrow if not today — in much the same manner! Beyond the wisdom of statesmanship and the sanction of force, is there not (there must be!) another power? —

I have found the way to join, —

The warrior's sword, builder of unity;

But where's the way to soldier? where? O Thor

And Odin, masters of the northern world,

Wisdom and force I have; one strength's behind

I have not...⁵⁴

As if in answer to his question he hears the song:

Love is the hoop of the gods

⁵⁴ *Eric* (1960), p. 1

Hearts to combine.
 Iron is broken, the sword
 Sleeps in the grave of its lord,
 Love is divine.⁵⁵

Odm and Thor, certainly, yet without the grace of Freya, Mother of Heaven, the rewards of the stern gods will come to nothing in the end.

Eric's rise to power and glory has meant the defeat and eclipse of Swegn, Earl of Trondhjem. Swegn's sister, Aslaug, and his wife, Hertha, have come to Eric's Court at Yara disguised as dancing-girls. It is Aslaug's song that Eric heard at the opening of the play, although he doesn't actually see her then. Aslaug and Hertha have come no doubt to strike a blow on Swegn's behalf, but they are not quite of one mind, and indeed they seem almost to think at cross-purposes. The sober and calculating Hertha asks:

Rather than by our blood to call for his,
 Is not a gentle peace still possible?
 Swegn might have Trondhjem, Eric all the north.
 The suzeranty? It is his. We fought for it.
 We have lost it. Think of this before we strike.⁵⁶

But, fiery like her brother, Aslaug will not compromise, and answers defiantly:

Better our barren empire of the snows!
 Nobler with reindeer herding to survive,
 Or else a free and miserable death
 Together.⁵⁷

Hertha cannot help feeling that, but for Aslaug, Swegn might still be persuaded to come to terms with Eric:

She is the fuel for my husband's soul
 To burn itself on a disastrous pyre.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2. ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 11. ⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11. ⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 13.

Hertha almost decides to sacrifice Aslaug if that is the only way to win the peace for Swegn and Norway.

When Eric and Aslaug meet, they experience strange stirrings within. "A mighty man!" is Aslaug's first impression:

He has the face and figure of a god, —
A marble emperor with brilliant eyes.

How came the usurper by a face like that?⁵⁹

Eric cannot make out whether Aslaug is but a dancing-girl or whether she is really someone with a nobler lineage who has come to his Court with a deeper intention than appears on the surface. And there is a siege of contraries — love and hate — in Aslaug's heart. After a sudden unexpected gesture of independence from her, Eric exclaims. "This was not spoken like a dancing-girl!"⁶⁰ At first she merely spurns with disdain his gift of a necklace, but presently she recollects her assumed humble role and tries to behave more circumspectly. "I am thy dancing-girl, King Eric", she says feebly, "See I take thy necklace". "Thy price or else my gift", he tells her, and gives her time to make up her mind. Aslaug thus finds herself caught in the coils of her own contradictions.

Hertha finds a new light in Aslaug's eyes — the light enkindled by the dawn of Love — and hopes that, perhaps, she may agree to playing a dubious role towards Eric: "I do not bid you yield, but seem to yield". But Aslaug is no more a complete mistress of her own heart. Eric's words when they meet —

Where

Did Odin forge thy sweet imperious eyes,
Thy noble stature and thy lofty look? —⁶¹

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 9. ⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 17. ⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 16.

take her aback, she is inly shaken, she is divided within, and at last says mournfully: "Odin and Freya, you have snares".⁶²

Things move swiftly with Eric and Aslaug, they play cat and mouse as it were, and once he violently seizes her in his arms and immediately strides out giving her time to collect herself. She is dazed, delirious, angry, confused;

How did it come? What was it leaped on me
And overpowered? O torn distracted heart,
Wilt thou not pause a moment and give leave
To the more godlike brain to do its work?
Can the world change within a moment? Can
Hate suddenly be love? Love is not here
I have the dagger still within my heart.

O he is terrible and fair and swift...
What was it seized on me, O heavenly powers?
I have given myself, my brother's throne and life,
My pride, ambition, hope, and grasp, and keep
Shame only...

Help me, you gods, help me against my heart.
I will strike suddenly...

It will be very difficult to strike!
But I will strike. Swegn strikes, and Norway strikes,
My honour strikes....⁶³

"I strike tonight", she tells Hertha, as if this explains everything. To forestall possible tragedy, Hertha reveals the plot to Eric, but only after extracting a promise from him that he would forgive her, and spare Swegn and Aslaug. When Hertha says —

King Eric, think me not thy enemy.

What thou desirest, I desire yet more —

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 34. ⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 46-7.

Eric answers:

Keep to that well; let Aslaug not suspect.
My way I'll take with her and thee and Swegn.
Fear nothing, Hertha; go.

(*Hertha goes*)

O Freya Queen,

Thou help'st me even as Thor and Odin did.

I make my Norway one.⁶⁴

When he meets Aslaug next, Eric has a definite edge over her, for he knows her flawed purpose, and he is half-amused to watch her hesitancy.

When she leaves him for a minute as if to get the necklace, he reads her mind correctly and says:

The power to strike has gone out of her arm
And only in her stubborn thought survives.

She thinks that she will strike. Let it be tried.⁶⁵

He is so sure of himself — and so sure of her too — that he feigns to sleep while awaiting her return. Coming upon him quietly, Aslaug starts musing:

Now I could slay him!

Might I not touch him only once in love —

And none know of it but death and I —

Whom I must slay like one who hates? Not hate,

O Eric, but the hard necessity

The gods have sent upon our lives, — two flames

That meet to quench each other Once, Eric! then

The cruel test. Why did I touch him? I am faint!...

*She lifts twice the dagger and lowers it twice,
then flings it on the ground, falling on her
knees at Eric's feet.*⁶⁶

Aslaug's "Now I could slay him!" recalls Hamlet's "Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying!" when he surprises

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 57 ⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 66. ⁶⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 66-8.

Uncle Claudius at prayer. But Aslaug finds it impossible to strike, and needs must break down. Her struggle is ended. She cannot kill the man she loves! But there is still shame and defeat in her heart, failing to kill Eric, hasn't she as good as killed her brother? And yet her love for Eric is an absolute that will permit no qualification. Once in possession of this knowledge, Eric has no difficulty in helping her to regain her self-respect:

Aslaug, see

Freya within her niche commands this room
And incense burns to her. Nor Thor for thee,
But Freya.⁶⁷

Eric and Aslaug exchange rings in token of their honourable love, and Aslaug has the satisfaction that she has saved Swegn and saved Norway, and has shown how the world could be saved from death by love.

Leaving Aslaug and Hertha, Eric starts on his final campaign against Swegn — this time, however, "with mercy and from love". Swegn rejects the terms of peace offered by Eric, and in the swift engagement that follows he loses again and retreats to the hills, but is taken captive and brought to Eric's Court at Yara.

In the last Act of the drama, Swegn at first scouts the very idea of submission to the upstart Eric. Even the conciliatory words of Hertha and Aslaug fail to make Swegn accept Eric's overlordship. It is only when, at Eric's behest, Aslaug and Hertha appear in their dancing-girl robes that Swegn relents, and agrees to submit to Eric unconditionally. It is Eric's turn now to reveal that Aslaug has become his wife and Queen, and that an honourable partnership opens before the former enemies. In dealing with Swegn, Eric finds it expedient to use

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 74.

force and understanding and even guile, but he wins the peace as he has already won the war. After the 'exposition' in the first Act of the play, Eric is seen achieving definitive ascendancy over Hertha and Aslaug in the second and third Acts respectively; in the fourth Act, he brings the war to an end by defeating Swegn and taking him captive; and in the fifth Act, Eric consolidates the gains of war and love by effecting a firm reconciliation and alliance with Swegn. The play thus presents Eric's growth as a man and as a ruler, and his awakening to the power of love—to the sovereign Grace of Freya.

While the human action is in the foreground, it is implied throughout that the gods are involved in the earth-drama. Albeit he is the darling of Odin and Thor, yet peace eludes Eric, there is an emptiness in his heart, and he is frank enough to confess: "Freya, Mother of Heaven, Thou wast forgotten".⁶⁸ Aslaug too, who comes to Eric's Court with the fire of Odin in her eyes, suddenly feels the sovereignty of Freya and the spirit of compassion, love and grace. And in his speech at the beginning of Act V, Eric grows new dimensions of consciousness that make him more than king and lover and statesman, he is something of a superman almost:

Somewhere

In this gigantic world of which one grain of dust
Is all our field, Eternal Memory keeps
Our great things and our trivial equally
To whom the peasant's moans above his head
Are tragic as a prince's fall. Some say
Atomic Chance has put Eric here, Swegn there,
Aslaug between. But O you revealing gods,

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p 2

I have seen myself and know, though veiled,
The immortality that thinks in me,
That plans and reasons.⁶⁹

And as for Swegn, Grace comes to him in the end when he sees Aslaug wearing Eric's ring (which is also Freya's ring):

It is Freya's ring, worn
On Aslaug's hand. And she who once wears it
Thenceforth sits on Norway's throne.⁷⁰

The marriage of Eric and Aslaug thus signifies the union of Power and Grace, and so a new era dawns on strong united Norway.

Eric is a shorter play than *Rodogune*, its verse moves with a larger nervous freedom, its impact on the reader is more immediate; and — as it was demonstrated once or twice by the students of the Mother's International School, New Delhi — the play could be very effective on the stage as well. In *Perseus* as well as *Eric* — both going back to far past legendary times — there is presented the clash between an old ethic and a new, associated respectively with two different gods: Poseidon and Pallas Athene in *Perseus*, and Thor and Freya in *Eric*. As in Tagore's *Sacrifice* and Christopher Fry's *Thor, with Angels*, — in the former the old bloodthirsty goddess comes out of her cruel prison of stone to find a sanctuary in the woman's compassionate heart, in the latter the old Pagan ethic associated with Thor and Odin gives place to the new Christian ethic, — in Sri Aurobindo's plays too the new force (compassion, love) has to emerge triumphant as an imperative of the evolutionary march. A "king-idea" and a "master-act" — Andromeda's, Aslaug's — can start the chain-reaction

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, pp 86-7 ⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p 99

that ensures and encompasses a decisive evolutionary change, taking humanity to a new stage in the growth of consciousness.

VI

The last of the completed plays, *Vasavadutta* has its immediate filiations with *Eric*, dramatic romances both of them. Politics of empire and romantic love play at cards as it were, and love proves the victor. In *Eric*, Aslaug comes with hatred in her heart to the Court at Yara and thinks that by killing the King she could win for her brother, Swegn, a game of politics that he couldn't win on the battlefield. Actually she succumbs to Eric's godlike beauty, and the flood of love wholly extinguishes the fires of hatred. In the later play, *Vasavadutta* allows herself to be used by her father, Chunda Mahasegn, as a pawn in his imperial politics, but she too succumbs to love, wins her own happiness, but worsts her father's plans. The mind schemes, but the heart scores.

"The action of the romance", writes Sri Aurobindo in a prefatory Note, "takes place a century after the war of the *Mahabharata*". A scion of the house of Parikshit, young Vuthsa Udayan rules at Cowsambie, flanked by Magadha in the east and by Avunthie (ruled by the ambitious Chunda Mahasegn) in the west. Cowsambie, ably sustained by Vuthsa's minister Yougundharayan, is the main hurdle against Mahasegn's dreams of empire; and he is determined, whether by hook or by crook, to reduce Cowsambie to vassalage. This is the political background of the play. For the romantic story, Sri Aurobindo went to the *Kathasaritsagara* of Somadeva,

and took a hint or two from Bhasa's dramatic version of the legend in his *Pratijna Yougandharayana*.⁷¹

The play begins with Chunda Mahasegn confessing to his son, Gopalaca, that young Vuthsa of Cowsambie has frustrated the dreams of empire: yet cunning may succeed where prowess has failed! Mahasegn therefore outlines his stratagem to Gopalaca:

Invent some strong device and bring him to us
A captive in Ujjayinie's golden groves.
Shall he not find there a jailor for his heart
To take the miracle of its keys and wear them
Swung on her raiment's border? Then he lives
Shut up by her close in a prison of joy,
Her and our vassal.⁷²

"The simile of the keys 'swung on her raiment's border' is a unique Bengali touch",⁷³ says Prema Nandakumar, and so indeed it is; Mahasegn's plan, then, is to kidnap Vuthsa, make him lose his heart to Princess Vasavadutta, and by this means to make him a mere vassal of Avunthie.

At Cowsambie, too, there are plans Yougundharayan suggests that "one day" Vuthsa might "join war with wedlock",

And pluck out from her guarded nest by force
The wonder of Avunthie, Vasavadutta.⁷⁴

⁷¹ For a full discussion of the play, the reader is referred to Prema Nandakumar's '*Vasavadutta: A Study*' in *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, Twenty-First Number (1965), pp. 48-81.

⁷² *Vasavadutta* (1957), p. 10. Although the name is spelt 'Mahasegu' in the 1957 edition, it is given as 'Mahasegn' in Volume 6 (*Collected Plays and Short Stories*, Part I) of the Centenary Library Edition (1971), conforming to the spelling in Sri Aurobindo's original manuscript. This spelling is accordingly adopted here.

⁷³ *Sri Aurobindo Circle* (XXI Number), p. 51.

⁷⁴ *Vasavadutta*, p. 17.

In the meantime Gopalaca arrives, ingratiates himself into Vuthsa's favour (notwithstanding his minister's warning), and the two young men have a happy time. When you look for it, it is *madhu* (honey) everywhere, and youth's a stuff that will not endure:

O, earth is honey; let me taste her all.

Our rapture here is short before we go

To other sweetness on some rare height

Of the upclimbing tiers that are the world.⁷⁵

Vuthsa with Gopalaca and other young friends go on an excursion to the Vindhya ranges. Perhaps Vuthsa has already an inkling into Gopalaca's dark mind, perhaps Vuthsa has his own audacious plan to match and master Gopalaca's. Left alone with him, Vuthsa makes a gesture of total trust in Mahasegn's son:

Let me rest awhile

My head upon thy lap, Gopalaca,

Before we plunge into this emerald world.

Shall we not wander in her green-roofed house

Where mighty Nature hides herself from men,

And be the friends of the great skyward peaks

That call us by their silence, bathe in tarns,

Dream where the cascades leap, and often spend

Slow moonless nights inarmed in leafy huts

Happier than palaces ...⁷⁶

In this atmosphere of dreamy calm and seeming trust, the "abduction" takes place easily enough. Yougundharayan is just a little too late, and he is besides prevented from effecting rescue by means of war by Vuthsa's clear prohibition:

Whatever seeks me from Fate, man or beast,

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43

Let not war sound without thy prince's leave.

Vuthsa will rescue Vuthsa.⁷⁷

Having made Vuthsa a captive, Mahasegn explains to his Queen Ungarica his plans for empire. Already a prisoner, Vuthsa's self-respect is to be further humbled by his being made a slave to Vasavadutta's charms. This is but the fuel of cheap diplomacy added to the fire of deceit and insult, and Queen Ungarica — who knows how unpredictable love could be — warns both her husband and daughter. Excellent to have made Vuthsa a captive in Ujjayinie, but that is only like holding the Sun under the armpit: "What wilt thou do with it?" she asks Mahasegn. "Make it my moon", he answers;⁷⁸ had he not won Ungarica herself by force? What is it that, with his scheming brain, he cannot accomplish? He now roundly proposes to Vasavadutta:

Thou, my child,
Must be the chain to bind him to my throne,
Thou my ambassador to win his mind
And thou my viceroy over his subject will...
..I'll not teach thy woman's tact
How it should mould this youth, nor warn thy will
Against the passions of the blood. The heart
And senses over common women rule;
Thou hast a mind.⁷⁹

He is sure his daughter will not let him down, that she will be all brain and calculation serving her father's imperial interests. Alone with her daughter, Ungarica draws her into her arms and gently unfolds the meaning and mystery of love:

Rest here, my child, to whom another bosom
Will soon be refuge. Thou hast heard the King,

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 48. ⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 54. ⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

Hear now thy mother. Thou wilt know, my bliss,
 The fiercest sweet ordeal that can seize
 A woman's heart and body. O my child,
 Thou wilt house fire, thou wilt see living gods;
 And all thou hast thought and known will melt away
 Into a flame and be reborn...
 My child, the flower blooms for its flowerhood only
 And not to make its parent bed more high...
 O Vasavadutta, when thy heart awakes
 Thou shalt obey thy sovereign heart, nor yield
 Allegiance to the clear-eyed selfish gods...⁸⁰

As yet, she cannot make out her mother's meaning; it's easier for her to grasp her father's thoughts! But a nameless new expectancy flutters in her heart and she awaits the turn of events.

The stage is now set for the "controlled experiment". Clever scheming Mahasegn might be Polonius boasting to Claudius "At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him (Hamlet)"! Even before Vasavadutta meets Vuthsa, her maid Munjoolica — who is herself the captive princess of Sourashtra — makes a report that is half-unnerving to steely Mahasegn's daughter: "I have seen the god of love wearing a golden human body".⁸¹ And, immediately afterwards, Gopalaca comes with Vuthsa and introduces the prince made captive to the princess the appointed jailor: he will serve her as slave, royal serf, musician, singer, page!⁸² Soon enough, they are left together: the princess gloating, the prince amused — but both obscurely and irresistibly affected, the nucleus of resistance suddenly shattered, the infinite contained energy released like an avalanche to overwhelm them. At first she tries

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 61. ⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 71.

to think that Vuthsa is only a toy, hence easily manageable:

He is a boy, a golden marvellous boy.
I am surely older! I can play with him.
There is no fear, no difficulty at all.⁸³

But when he says —

The deepest things are those thought seizes not;
Our spirits live their hidden meaning out. . —⁸⁴

she is disturbed, she is out of her depth, and seeks safety in a panicky retreat. Her words show that the fortress of her self-confidence is quite vulnerable:

Will he charm me from my purpose with a smile?
How beautiful he is, how beautiful!
There is a fear, there is a happy fear. .
I sent him from me, for his words troubled me
And still delighted. They have a witchery, —
No, not his words, but voice. 'Tis not his voice,
Nor yet his smile, his face, his flower-soft eyes
And yet it is all these and something more

(shaking her head)

I fear it will be difficult after all.⁸⁵

Point counter point: Munjoolica the other captive, coming upon Vuthsa alone, tells him that she too had been seized by Gopalaca — but in battle — and brought as “a disdainful gift to Vasavadutta”; and Vuthsa sharply adds: “Since our fates are one, should we not be allies?”⁸⁶ Well, he will help her to regain her freedom, she must help him to gain Vasavadutta! And Munjoolica is able to assure him at once:

Vuthsa, she loves thee as the half-closed bud
Thrills to the advent of a wonderful dawn

⁸³ *ibid* , p. 73. ⁸⁴ *ibid* , p. 76.

⁸⁵ *ibid* , p. 78. ⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 80.

And like a dreamer half-awake perceives

The faint beginnings of a sunlit world.⁸⁷

In the next scene (III.5), we find that the fire is already ablaze in Vasavadutta's heart:

I govern no longer what I speak and do.

Is this the fire my mother spoke of?⁸⁸

While they converse, there is thrust and parry — Oh, certainly he will be her obedient servant, yet he cannot make Cowsambie a pawn, for its crown is not his only, but belongs to "many other souls":

Their names are endless. Bharuth first

Who ruled the Aryan earth that bears his name,

And great Dushyanta and Pururavas'

Famed warlike son and all their peerless line,

Arjoona and Parikshit and his sons

Whom God descended to enthrone, and all

Who shall come after us, my heirs and thine

Who chooseth me, and a great nation's multitudes,

And the Kuru ancestors and long posterity

Who all must give consent..⁸⁹

And he could be hers only when they are in Cowsambie, and she becomes his Queen.

All Mahasegn's calculations go wrong, all Ungarica's prophecies come true. Thrown together again and again by the pretence of music lessons, Vasavadutta and Vuthsa enact the categorical imperatives of romantic love, — in this, of course, abetted by Munjoolica who as good as locks them up together one night. Having thus advanced Vuthsa's interests and achieved her own revenge, Munjoolica is ready to help Vasavadutta in her predicament. There are other helpers too — one of Vuthsa's men who has come in disguise from Cowsambie, the Queen

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 82. ⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 84. ⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 89.

Mother Ungarica, and Vasavadutta's younger brother, Vicurna. Under cover of a moonlit party in the pleasure-groves of the palace, the lovers escape, along with Munjoolica and Vicurna. Pursuit by Mahasegn's forces proves fruitless. Reconciled to the event, Mahasegn sends through Gopalaca all Vasavadutta's wealth and dowry, and Vuthsa is able to assure his beloved: "Love, the storm is past, the peril o'er". Mahasegn's moves and Yougundharayan's counter-moves are but frills in the background and the romantic action, with its psychological subtlety and dramatic intensity, is alone the life and soul of the play. And it is the measure of Mahasegn's final discomfiture that he exclaims towards the end, "Do all my house, my blood revolt against me?"⁹⁰

VII

Sri Aurobindo's unfinished plays shouldn't long detain us.⁹¹ *The Maid in the Mill. Love Shuffles the Cards* was written in Baroda but published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* in 1962; *Prince of Edur* was written in 1907 (as indicated in the manuscript) and *The House of Brut* about the same time, and both were published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* in 1961. Tantalisingly incomplete though they are, the full *dramatis personae* is prefixed to each of them. Sri Aurobindo had, perhaps, com-

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁹¹ The reader is referred to Prema Nandakumar's article on 'Sri Aurobindo's Unfinished Plays' in *Sri Aurobindo Circle* (Nineteenth Number), 1963, pp. 31-50.

pleted the plotting in his mind, but the hand hadn't kept pace with it.⁹²

The earliest of all, *The Witch of Ilni*, dated October 1891, is now included in Volume 7 of Centenary Library Edition. This 600-line long, but fragmentary, piece is redolent of Elizabethan pastoral romance. The opening song —

Under the darkling tree
Who danceth with thee,
Sister, say? —

inevitably recalls Shakespeare's 'Under the greenwood tree', and in the Woodlands of Ilni one can breathe the Forest of Arden atmosphere. It is a juvenile exercise, but already these foresters and forest damsels, Melander the poet and Alaciel the charmer, and the intoxicating music and magic and enchantment of love seem to foreshadow the later dramas of conflict and change in strange and far countries. And in the evocation of Dawn by Myrtil —

Now kernelled in the golden husk of day
Pale night with all her pomp of sorrow sleeps,
And stinted of soft-clinging melancholy
The elegiac nightingale is hushed...
But all the votarists of happy Light,
A rainbow-throated anarchy of wings,
Lift anthems to the young viceregent sun —

we have a promising first sketch of the greater Dawns

⁹² *Mother India* (May 1971) has published yet another of Sri Aurobindo's dramatic fragments. It has no title, and is cast in the form of a conversation between King Esarhaddon and the priest Achab, who between them would like to humanise the current religion of Baal—a cult harsh and bloody—more in tune with the evolutionary purpose. The theme has obvious affiliations with the change in religion in *Perseus the Deliverer* and *Eric*.

to come, culminating in 'The Symbol Dawn' of *Savitri*.

The Maid in the Mill is very much of a comedy in the Shakespearian manner, and even otherwise the play is full of Shakespearian echoes. "I have a whole drama in my head", says Brigida, "a play in a play and yet no play"; a teasing statement, this, and all the more teasing because — the play being unfinished — the reader is now obliged to make up the drama in his own head. The Antonio-Ismenia story has a Romeo-Juliet flavour. Thus Ismenia:

Can hatred sound so sweet? Are enemies' voices
Like hail of angels to the ear...?

Antonio is no less infected:

There was a majesty
Even in her tremulous playfulness, a thrill
When she smiled most, made my heart beat too
quickly

For speech.

There is also the Benedick-Beatrice dialectic in the subplot relating to Basil-Brigida:

BRIGIDA.

Pray now, disburden your intellect of all the brilliant things it has so painfully kept to itself. Plethora is unwholesome and I would not have you perish of an apoplexy of wit. Pour it out on me, conceit, epigram, irony, satire, vituperation; flout and invective, tuquoque and double-entendre, pun and quibble, rhyme and unreason, catcall and onomatopoeia; all, all, though it be an avalanche. It will be terrible, but I will stand the charge of it.

BASIL.

St.Iago! I think she has the whole dictionary in her stomach. I grow desperate.

In the tradition of Shakespearian comedy, lovers come, not as an isolated pair, but many in rows and file. The scenes have bright patches of verse and sparkling bits of prose, but all these do not add up to a rounded play.

The House of Brut is even more of a fragment than *The Maid in the Mill*, for a solitary scene (II.i) alone has survived. The legendary Brutus (Aeneas' grandson) delivered the displaced Trojans from their captivity in Greece, and took them to the far-off island, named after him Britain, to establish a new Troy there. Sri Aurobindo's play was meant to present the struggle between the descendents of Brutus and the invading Huns under Humber. When he is drunk with success, Humber thinks that he is greater than Thor, and thus addresses the captive Princess Estrild:

Kneel down, daughter of princes, favoured more
Than Freya or Gudurn, for these were wives
Of gods or demigods, but thou the slave
Of Humber....

Like Polydaon, Humber too seems to have been intended as a dramatic study in megalomania — the overweening pride that canters before the inevitable fall.

In the early fragment, *The Prince of Mathura*, Ajamede the fugitive in the mountains is the intended hero-saviour of Mathura from the usurper Atry, and perhaps Ajamede also marries Atry's daughter, Urmila. Sri Aurobindo seems to have enlarged the theme in *Prince of Edur* by making the more authentic Bappa "in refuge among the Bheels" take the place of Ajamede.

Prince of Edur was written (according to the publisher's note) "in the very thick of the maelstrom of his (Sri Aurobindo's) political activity". Historically, Bappa the hero of the play was the founder of the greatness

of Mewar. He had spent his childhood among the Bheels (Bhils) of the forest, become their chieftain, and ultimately founded a Kingdom around Chitor. In Sri Aurobindo's play, Bappa of the Bheels—who is really the Prince of Edur in exile—manages to thwart the designs of all his enemies including the usurper Rana of Edur, and marries his daughter as well. The clash of interests and the heady march of events make for dramatic excitement, but Sri Aurobindo seems also to have visualised Bappa in the prototypical image of patriot and deliverer, a fiery son of the Mother issuing from his 'Bhavani Mandir' in the hills to cause confusion among the enemies of the country. Toraman might be symbolic of the 'alien', the usurping Rana of the local 'collaborator'. As in *Vasavadutta*, the abduction motif is central to the plot of *Prince of Edur*, but it is worked out differently here. The Rana plans that Comol Cumary (Kamal Kumari) should be abducted by Toraman; the Rana's wife would rather that Pratap the Chouhan did it; but, actually, the Rana's minister sees to it that Bappa does the kidnapping! The play is full of moves and counter-moves, awakenings and conversions, but it is the romantic love between Bappa and Comol that is the heart of the matter. The quality of the poetry may be illustrated by one or two passages. Thus the minister to Bappa:

Dare greatly and thou shalt be great; despise
 Apparent death and from his uplifted hand
 Of menace pluck thy royal destinies
 By warlike violence.

If this be the heroic note, here is the complementary romantic tune:

It is the May-feast of my love,

Coomood, the May-feast of my life, the May
That in my heart shall last for ever, sweet
For ever and for ever.

In one sense, of course, it is unfair to Sri Aurobindo's literary genius to discuss plays and fragments which he didn't finalise or complete, and which were not published in his lifetime — or, perhaps, were not meant to be published at all. In many instances, the text has had to be made up on a comparison of variant readings in different drafts or in the same copy.⁹³ On the other hand, these plays and fragments contain a body of dramatic poetry that is of impressive bulk as well as of rich individuality, and in the context of the period when they were written, they too — like *Perseus*, the one play published in his lifetime — throw a revealing light on his political preoccupations, his growing sense of life's movements and purposes, and above all they imply forward glances at his Yogic thought and the profound spiritual insights of his later poetry, notably *Savitri*. Strange how the 'captivity' theme — captivity and release — figures in so many of the plays, in one form or another; captive nations, captive princes, captive princesses, captive merchants, captive slaves! And the varieties of deliverance from captivity! But out of the shocks of struggle and captivity, and captivity and deliverance, out of such shocks alone revolutionary changes and great leaps forward seem to be possible.⁹⁴ And the

⁹³ The Publisher's Note prefixed to *Elle* says, for instance "One is not sure which corrections were the last to be made. The text published now is more or less a combination of two or more drafts wherever it was thought that the author's purposes would be preserved by this arrangement."

⁹⁴ Vide Prema Nandakumar's 'The Captivity Theme in Sri Aurobindo's Plays' in the *Banasthali Patrika*, January 1969, pp. 162-73

role of the blessed Feminine is another recurrent motif in these plays. Andromeda, Anice-aljalice, Rodogune, Aslaug, Vasavadutta, Comol Coomary form a zigzag series of the eternal feminine, comprising all the womanly virtues, and in the fullness of time beyonding them in the terrible and beautiful Penthesilea (in *Ilion*), culminating at last in Savitri the Woman Divine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MUSA SPIRITUS

I

During his stay in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo wrote a number of shorter poems, most of which owed their primary inspiration to his growing familiarity with India's philosophical and spiritual heritage, especially the Vedanta. The Upanishads and the *Gita* had swum into his ken and stimulated in him a spirit of restless philosophical inquiry into the "first and last things" and the realm of "ends and means". Religion, humanism, science: God, man, Nature: Providence, foreknowledge and fate: rebirth, evolution and progress — what did they mean? He would not take things simply on trust. He must think things out for himself, he must come to grips with them, feel them, become one with them—if possible! As he pondered thus, as he perceived or experienced a particular movement of thought, as he glimpsed in the prevalent obscurity and confusion some star-image, some inspiring vision, he endeavoured to express his reactions in rhythmic or poetic language. Mere wonder, puzzlement or exasperation gave place to a mood of inquiry, and inquiry to speculation or a dialectic of doubt, and these again to something like Faith. At the least, on the merely intellectual plane, the doubts are stilled, the crust of agnosticism and the coating of an imposed culture are cast aside, and the true self has now safely come through.

But as yet Sri Aurobindo was grappling with ultimate Reality mainly — if not solely — with the aid of the in-

tellec and the imagination. He was, no doubt, groping towards spirituality — he had had two or three momentary “hot links” with Reality — he had had nameless stirrings within and ineffable, if transient, realisations — but he had not made (or even tried to make) spirituality the ruling principle of his life. Thus these early poems, even those with a pronounced philosophical slant, are not — strictly speaking — mystical outpourings. The poems have come — to use the phraseology of his later writings — from the levels of the Higher Mind or the Illumined Mind, perhaps even of the Intuitive Mind, and give us only philosophical generalisations or images of vividly perceived facets of the Truth. Sri Aurobindo himself has remarked that “the mental intuitions of the metaphysician or the poet for the most part fall far short of a concrete spiritual experience; they are distant flashes, shadowy reflections, not rays from the centre of Light”.¹ But even these — the flashes and the reflections — the formulations and the recollections — are of considerable value to the spiritual aspirant, and for ever valuable as poetry. To quote from Sri Aurobindo again, although a mere philosophical statement about the Atman may be no more than a mental formula,

yet sometimes the Divine takes it as a channel of touch; strangely, a barrier in the mind breaks down, something is seen, a profound change operated in some inner part, there enters into the ground of the nature something calm, equal, ineffable.... Similar touches can come through art, music, poetry to their creator or to one who feels the shock of the word, the hidden significance of a form, a message in the sound that carries more perhaps than was consciously

¹ *The Riddle of This World* (1943 Edition), p. 40.

meant by the composer. All things in the Lila can turn into windows that open on the hidden Reality".²

II

Some of these early philosophical poems — the long *In the Moonlight*, for example — are more intellectually than imaginatively sustained, and hence the articulation is not uniformly on a high poetic level. Others like *To the Sea* and *The Vedantin's Prayer*, for all their packed thought and mastery of phrase, do not seem to employ the absolutely appropriate rhythm, divinely appointed as it were for the communication of mystic truths. But even these pieces display an admirable metrical craftsmanship and a tightness and precision in language that compel attention. On the other hand, there are poems like *A Child's Imagination*, *Revelation*, *The Sea at Night* and the sonnets on Death that are poetry first, and philosophy only afterwards. Finally, a dialogue like *The Rishi* and poems like *Who* and *A Vision of Science* have an Upanishadic ring, and come to us like whispers and communications from another world, the world of the archetypes and the superconscient self-luminous Truth.

Here is a simple poem entitled, *God*:

Thou who pervadest all the worlds below,
 Yet sitst above,
 Master of all who work and rule and know,
 Servant of Love!

Thou who disdainest not the worm to be
 Not even the clod,

² *ibid.*, pp 40-1

Therefore we know by that humility
That thou art God.³

The inversion "the worm to be" instead of "to be the worm" was perhaps necessary in the interests of rhyme; otherwise there is no ambiguity about the meaning. The sense is that God, while he is the ruler of men of action, power and knowledge, is really the servant of Love; it is Love that compels Him to give himself to everyone and everything. He may be the greatest of the great, yet He is one with all the worlds below, he does not disdain to dwell in the clod and the worm; and, as Sri Aurobindo himself has explained it, "the vast impartiality shown in this humility is itself the very sign of the greatness of the Divine".⁴ Not only does He descend into and fill the obscurest figures of Nature, but He also animates them with the Divine Presence. God is certainly power, knowledge, infinity and omnipresence, but He is even more essentially Love.

In the longer poem, *Parabrahman*, the Ultimate is unravelled as the triune splendour, *sat-chit-ananda*:

Within Himself He shadowed Being forth,
Which is a younger birth, a veil He chose
To half-conceal Him, Knowledge, nothing worth
Save to have glimpses of its mighty cause,
And high Delight, a spirit infinite,
That is the fountain of this glorious world,
Delight that labours in its opposite,
Faints in the rose and on the rack is curled.
This was the triune playground that He made...⁵

The drama of Becoming is His *lila* and comprises la-

³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 143.

⁴ Quoted in Sethna's *Sri Aurobindo—The Poet*, p. 352.

⁵ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 143.

bour, failure, strife, forgetful knowledge divining itself, surfeit of bliss curdling into pain, unity of existence dividing into life and death. To get back to the unity, the knowledge, the pure delight is the Vedantin's aspiration, but while the spirit is willing the flesh is weak; the Vedantin can but send this prayer forth to the Supreme:

Let not my grey
 Blood-clotted past repel thy sovereign ruth,
 Nor even delay,
 O lonely Truth!
 . Nor let the specious gods who ape Thee still
 Deceive my youth...
 O hidden door
 Of Knowledge, open! Strength, fulfil thyself!
 Love outpour!⁶

If the Vedantin's eyes are really awakened, distant flashes can reach him testifying to the *one* Omnipresent Reality. The sight of a tree makes him view the "soul of man" as being "earth-bound, heaven-amorous".⁷ Human love breaks its bonds and grows immortal dimensions:

Immortal to immortal I made speed.
 Change I exceed
 And am for Time prepared.⁸

The marvels of sound and sight — a bird's song at dawn, lustre in midnight — become a reminiscence of the drama of creation.⁹ The celebration of the child Basanti's birthday becomes an occasion for the inference of immortality in mortal things:

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 136-7. ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 128. ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 128. ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 124.

O dear child soul, our loved and cherished,
 For this thy days had birth,
 Like some tender flower on some grey stone portal
 To sweeten and flush with childhood immortal
 The ageing earth.¹⁰

It is a new kind of seeing, a new gift of vision, and anything seen — a woman sleeping in her garden, someone leaping from the rocks and running away, the hushed hour of evening — becomes the take-off point to lose oneself in Eternity:

The wind walked softly; silent moved a cloud
 Listening; of all the tree no leaf was loud,
 But guarded a divine expectant hush
 Thrilled by the silence of a hidden thrush...¹¹

Like a startled bright surmise
 Visible to mortal eyes...
 Someone of the heavenly rout
 From behind the veil ran out...¹²

A golden evening.... Such hour is nearest God, —
 Like rich old age when the long ways have all

been trod ¹³

First impressions and the last wisdom merge into one another, and poetry comes to be charged with something akin to apocalyptic power.

Man no doubt looks out of the windows of the senses, and he needs must receive impressions of the phenomenal world through the same doors of communication; but presently the mind intervenes, it processes the impressions, organises them, deduces conclusions from them, and builds 'systems' out of them. Yet the intellect, and science that

¹⁰ *More Poems*, p. 4 ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 8

¹² *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 131. ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 141.

is the handiwork of the operations of the intellect, do not — alas, they cannot — by themselves pluck the heart of the mystery of existence. In *A Vision of Science*, as also *In the Moonlight*, Sri Aurobindo shows how science itself is now being driven to recognise its limitations, thus transcending the materialistic dogmatisms of the nineteenth century. Three Angels seem to strive for mastery in the world, and this strife is seen reflected in man's consciousness. Religion held sway first, then Science slowly pushed it to a corner. The secrets of Nature were wrested one by one, and they were sorted out, categorised, and all but taken for granted:

Man's spirit measuring his worlds around
 The laws of sight divined and laws of sound.
 Light was not hidden from its searching gaze,
 Nor matter could deny her myriad maze
 To the cold inquiry; for the far came near,
 The small loomed large, the intricate grew clear.¹⁴

There was no end to the ingenuity and pertinacity of Science: earthquakes were foretold, storms analysed, earth's history was traced, great distances were bridged, and even the mind's movements were charted. When the other Angel ventured to ask, "*Who art thou labouring here on earth?*", Science merely answered:

Nothing am I but earth,
 Tissue and nerve and from the seed a birth,
 A mould, a plasm, a gas, a little that is much.
 In these grey cells that quiver to each touch
 The secret lies of man...
 Shakespeare was this; this force in Jesus yearned
 And conquered by the cross; this only learned

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp 125-6.

The secret of the suns that blaze afar;
 This was Napoleon's giant mind of war...¹⁵
 This may be compared with a later sonnet, *A Dream of Surreal Science*, in which the same idea is expressed in even more pointedly satirical terms:

One dreamed and saw a gland write *Hamlet*, drink
 At the Mermaid, capture immortality;
 A committee of Hormones on the Aegean's brink
 Composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.
 A thyroid, meditating almost nude
 Under the Bo-tree, saw the eternal Light
 And, rising from its mighty solitude,
 Spoke of the Wheel and eightfold Path all right.
 A brain by a disordered stomach driven
 Thundered through Europe, conquered, ruled
 and fell.

From St. Helena went, perhaps, to Heaven...¹⁶
 On the eve of the atomic blast, Sri Aurobindo could be downright devastating as in the above sonnet, but thirty or forty years earlier he preferred to be more insinuating, more persuasively positive in his affirmation. That man's mind should reduce humanity to cells, glands and plasmas was like the infinite denying infinity! While the two Angels were caught in their dialectic, there came the third Angel and tore away the film of ignorance that had clouded the vision till then. The march of science, the march of science! — but who is to get beyond science's bafflement, who is to out-miracle the miracles of science? Slow and sure the assurance comes: man is not gene or germ or gland or plasm; he is "infinite, moving mid infinities"; he is verily the Eternal concealed in the finite and the temporal. It is also this

¹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 126-7 ¹⁶ *Last Poems* (1952), p. 27.

Dancer on the stage of the universe — that invites man too to participate in the ecstatic play:

I sport with solitude here in my regions,
Of misadventure have made me a friend.
Who would live largely? Who would live freely?
Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend!

I am the lord of tempest and mountain,
I am the Spirit of freedom and pride.
Stark must he be and a kinsman to danger
Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.¹⁸

In *The Triumph-Song of Trishuncou*, the king is not daunted by the fear of death, he is not appalled by the thought of the tomb, for he knows that he had no beginning and could have no end. What wastes and may have to be cast away is the covering or the case, not the undying self:

Ere the first seeds
Were sown on earth, I was already old,
And when now unborn planets shall grow cold
My history proceeds.

I am the light
In stars, the strength of lions and the joy
Of mornings; I am man and maid and boy,
Protean, infinite.¹⁹

In *The Fear of Death*, again, there is the firm declaration:

Death is but changing of our robes to wait
In wedding garments at the Eternal's gate.²⁰

In one of the sonnets also, Sri Aurobindo dismisses the

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 121 (From *Invitation*, composed in the Alipur jail.)

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 140. ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 144.

finality of death by calling mortality and pain "mere conventions" of a "mightier stage".

As when a hero by his doom pursued
Falls like a pillar of the world upturned,
Shaking the hearts of men, and awe-imbued
Silent the audience sits of joy forlorn,
Meanwhile behind the stage the actor sighs
Deep-lunged relief, puts by what he has been
And talks with friends that waited...
Even so the unwounded spirits of slayer and slain
Beyond our vision passing live again.²¹

This is a simile apt enough, but not the same thing as the recordation of a mystical experience of the transcendence of death; and this applies also to the two companion sonnets "To weep because a glorious sun has set" and "I have a hundred lives before me yet"²² — sonnets that otherwise have almost a Shakespearian ring. The shorter *Life and Death* is likewise hardly anything more than a brilliantly succinct intellectual statement:

Life, death, — death, life: the words have led for ages
Our thought and consciousness and firmly seemed
Two opposites; but now long-hidden pages
Are opened, liberating truths undreamed.
Life only is, or death is life disguised, —
Life a short death until by life we are surprised.²³

This of course is rather more than a metaphor ("long hidden pages are opened"), and there is the intimation of the surpassing of the seeming opposites and dualities, but the poem itself has a severely intellectual cast; it doesn't bite or burn into the consciousness. In *Rebirth*, on the other hand, the idea of "I have a hundred lives

²¹ *More Poems*, p. 17. ²² *ibid.*, pp. 18-9.

²³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 141.

before me yet" is elaborated with some wealth of detail — as if surmise and memory have fused in the crucible of the imagination — and the result is satisfying poetry:

Not soon is God's delight in us completed,
Nor with one life we end;
Termlessly in us are our spirits seated
And termless joy intend...

Old memories come to us, old dreams invade us,
Lost people we have known,
Fictions and pictures; but their frames evade us, —
They stand out bare, alone...

Our past that we forget, is with us deathless,
Our births and later end
Already accomplished. To a summit breathless
Sometimes our souls ascend,
Whence the mind comes back helped; for there

emerges

The ocean vast of Time
Spread out before us with its infinite surges,
Its symphonies sublime...²⁴

There is no question here about the genuineness of the inspiration; what is lacking is the incandescent finality of poetic utterance.

III

Two of the longest of the earlier poems, *In the Moonlight* and *The Rishi*, return to a serious consideration of the "first and last" questions, and cover the entire philosophical ground; but they follow different

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

paths, for *The Rishi* is Upanishadic in cast while *In the Moonlight* is more of a meditative reverie. Although distantly reminiscent of Tennyson in his speculative vein and even of Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam in some places, *In the Moonlight* is rather more typically of Arnoldian vintage — the Arnold of "high seriousness". The poem opens with an evocation of a moonlit scene: "How living a stillness reigns!" Only three things disturb the silence — the slow wind, the cricket's cry and the frog's discord:

Yet they but seem the silence to increase
 And dreadful wideness of the inhuman night.
 The whole hushed world immeasurable might
 Be watching round this single spot of peace ²⁵

It is an ideal moment for purposive introspection. To what end is human life? Where have we come from? Whither are we bound? Man is a veritable siege of contradictory pulls, for two genii "wrestle and strive" in his "dubious heart", and this has been going on "since the race began":

One from his body like a bridge of fire
 Mounts upward azure-winged with eager eyes;
 One in his brain deep-mansioned labouring lies
 And clamps to earth the spirit's high desire. ²⁶

The brain has been on the ascendant of late, and has been deflating the heart's rosy fancies and soaring hopes. Death is affirmed as the inevitable end, and things grow only to decay and disappear at last:

Stars run their cycle and are quenched; the suns
 Born from the night are to the night returned,
 When the cold tenebrous spaces have inured
 The listless phantoms of the Shining Ones. ²⁷

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 163. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 164. ²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 165.

The origins of human life can only point to an icy conclusion, and yet — how frantic our efforts, how futile the results!

Watering the ages with our sweat and blood

We pant towards some vague ideal state

And by the effort fiercer ills create,

Working by lasting evil transient good.²⁸

Were it not better done, as the Hedonists and Epicureans advise, to seize the moment — live in it, dive in it — eat, drink and be merry — for tomorrow may be our turn to die! —

The wine of life is sweet; let no man stint

His longing or refuse one passionate hope.

Why should we cabin in such infinite scope,

Restrict the issue of such golden mint?²⁹

Can Science at least point to a worthier goal? But Science first denies man's immortality — then assumes what she rejects — and is at last baffled by her own sophistries. That is not the way at all! Truth cannot be contained by Science's "material finds" alone, for Truth is larger than formulas, and subtler than the sophist's pleas:

The intellect is not all; a guide within

Awaits our question. He it was informed

The reason, He surpasses; and unformed

Presages of His mightiness begin.³⁰

Science has helped us, — science musn't consign us to the clouds of unknowing Beyond the near horizons of mere intellectual inquiry and scientific hypotheses, there loom other horizons, "the orange skies of the mystic mind" — soul-immensities, ineffable realities.

Freedom, God, Immortality; the three

²⁸ *ibid.*, p 166. ²⁹ *ibid.*, p 166 ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 168.

Are one and shall be realised at length,
 Love, Wisdom, Justice, Joy and utter Strength
 Gather into a pure felicity.

It comes at last, the day foreseen of old,
 What John in Patmos saw, what Shelley

dreamed...³¹

The Iron Age is ended, the Age of Gold must begin —

Only now

The last fierce spasm of the dying past

Shall shake the nations...

When the strife and pain are over, man shall rise to greater heights, and he shall "build immortally with mortal things".

In this poem of about 200 lines, there is a structure of argument that impresses, there are flashes of poetry that impinge on the receptive consciousness, and the whole dialectic steams forward towards the flagstaff apocalyptic vision of the Golden Age ahead. It is a notable intellectual statement in poetic terms, but the philosophy cannot be said to have been wholly consumed in the poetry.

The Rishi is an even longer poem, and perhaps a more ambitious one as well. The situation is significant: King Manu of old seeks knowledge from the Rishi of the North Pole, and what follows is the Upanishadic conversation between Manu and the Rishi. It is with Manu's magnificent invocation that the dialogue begins:

Rishi who trance-held on the mountains old

Art slumbering, void

Of sense or motion, for in the spirit's hold

Of unalloyed

³¹ *ibid.*, pp 169-170.

Immortal bliss thou dreamst protected! Deep
 Let my voice glide
 Into thy dumb retreat and break that sleep
 Abysmal. Hear!³²

The King, whose gait is an empire and whose eye is Dominion, has come to learn from the Rishi the ultimate truths — to acquire the power of penetrating vision — that mankind had possessed in the morning of its racial history, but has since lost, as if irretrievably! The Rishi at first recapitulates his own early life:

I too, O King,
 In winds and tides
 Have sought Him, and in armies thundering,
 And where Death strides
 Over whole nations. Action, thought and peace
 Were questioned, sleep,
 And waking, but I had no joy of these...³⁵

He had had fleeting glimpses, but the miraculous moments had passed, and were not to be recalled. He couldn't retain the force, the light; and so he had retired to the arctic heights where "pride could not follow, nor the restless will come and go". Manu now asks whether the Light isn't more likely to show itself in the haunts of human life, in the midst of Nature's seething life, than in the "great dumb night" on the "cold unchanging hill" of the arctic regions. The Rishi simply says that for the loss of human company and Nature's loveliness, the gain is Silence, for "the One is silence, on the snows we hear silence tread".³⁴ But what exactly has the Rishi learned? What are the pointer readings and the definitive findings of his tapasya?

An exciting colloquy follows, and the King is there-

³² *ibid.*, p. 145. ³³ *ibid.*, p. 147. ³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 148.

by enabled to zigzag his way to the shining tablelands of the ultimate Truth. When the Rishi had won mastery over the fear of the body's death, a hidden Power within had found release, and his winged soul had soared to the stars. But neither the sun nor the planets nor the other heavenly bodies could tell the Rishi the way to the abode of God; they no doubt knew how to go their respective ways careering through the vasts of space, but they knew not their origin. Then the Rishi had sought the clue from the Devas, the bright denizens of Heaven. But they were ignorant too: "How shall they tell of Him who marvel at sin and smile at grief?" The angels themselves knew Him not, they only feared His frown, and they had static constricted minds. At least, at least, the Trinity — Vishnu-Brahma-Shiva — could enlighten the Rishi? But no! they too were content to rest on their respective lonely eminences. What then? Had the Rishi but travelled in vain among the "unwonted stars" and covered the infinite spaces? The Rishi answers.

King, not in vain... I saw

How earth was made

Out of His being; I perceived the Law,

The Truth, the Vast,

From which we came and which we are; I heard

The ages past

Whisper their history, and I knew the Word

That forth was cast

Into the unformed potency of things...³⁵

Perhaps, after all, poor insignificant earth is alone His auspicious abode? Not the material earth; nor the vital force called life, nor yet the mind of man — none of these entirely holds Him. Winging beyond all these, and

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 151-2.

beyond all the ranges of human thought, the Power within — the Rishi's inner light — had made him soar and roam and seek, and find Him too at last:

Higher, O King, the still voice bade me rise
Than thought's clear dream.

Deep in the luminous secrecy, the mute
Profound of things,

Where murmurs never sound of harp or lute
And no voice sings,

Light is not, nor our darkness, nor these bright
Thunderings,

In the deep steady voiceless core of white
And burning bliss,

The sweet vast centre and the cave divine
Called Paradise,

He dwells within us all who dwell not in
Aught that is. ³⁶

He is everything essentially because He is nothing in particular. The One remains, the many change and pass; the true Light forever shines, the transient shadows chase one another and scatter away. The King cannot help wondering at this stage of the argument whether — if this were all — life isn't mere illusion, a teasing phantasmagoria? The Rishi assures Manu that such is not the case. There are degrees of reality, although the one Truth sustains them all:

Yet, King, deem nothing vain. through many veils
This Spirit gleams.

The dreams of God are truths and He prevails...

Even as a ship upon the stormy flood
With fluttering sails

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 153.

Labours towards the shore; the angry mood
Of ocean swells,
Calms come and favouring winds, but yet afar
The harbour pales
In evening mists and Ocean threatens war:
Such is our life...

Grieve not for wounds, nor fear the violent storms,
For grief and pain
Are errors of the clouded soul; behind
They do not stain
The living spirit...

To bring those heavens down upon the earth
We all descend...

Shrink not from life, O Aryan, but with mirth
And joy receive
His good and evil, sin and virtue. ³⁷

Manu asks again where — whether in heaven or on the
earth — he should seek God, and firm comes the Rishi's
answer:

Seek Him upon the earth...

Perfect thy human might,
Perfect the race.
For thou art He, O King. Only the night
Is on thy soul
By thy own will. Remove it and recover
The serene whole
Thou art indeed, then raise up man the lover
To God the goal.³⁸

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 156, 158, 159, 160, 161 ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 162

It is a memorable *finale* which underlines one of the cardinal elements in later Aurobindonian thought, namely that it is not by escaping into Heaven but by bringing it down, it is not retreating from life but by confronting, mastering and transforming it, that the Life Divine or the Earthly Paradise is to be established here. *The Rishi* is full of echoes from the Upanishads (for example, "thou art He, O King" after "thou art That, O Svetaketu!"; and the four-fold scheme of experience in the poem after that in the *Mandukya*), and the very cast of the dialogue is Upanishadic; but the main conclusion at least is distinctly Aurobindonian. Further, the Rishi's travels in the worlds might be a first foreshadowing of Aswapathy's more extensive travels in *Savitri*. On a total view, then, it may not be wide of the mark to describe *The Rishi* as the comprehensive poetic testament of the first phase of Sri Aurobindo's career as a laureate of the Spirit.

IV

Some of the pieces included under *Nine Poems* in the second volume of Sri Aurobindo's *Collected Poems and Plays* — the dialogue, *The Birth of Sin*, and the three speculative poetic exercises, *The Rakshasas*, *Kama* and *Kuthumi* — probably belong to the political period, though it is possible that they were conceived during the last years at Baroda. In any case, the poems go naturally with *The Rishi*, *A Vision of Science* and *In the Moonlight*. *Ahana* too belongs to this twilight period, but as it received considerable revision before it was reprinted in 1942 in the collected edition, this long poem

in rhymed hexameters may be more appropriately discussed in a later chapter, along with *Ilion*, the unfinished Homeric epic in unrhymed hexameters.

Of the projected earlier drama, *The Birth of Sin*, only a scene (Prologue) from Act I has survived and is now included in Volume 7 of the Centenary Library Edition. In the *Dramatis Personae* figure Lucifer, Sirioth, Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Belial, Baal, Moloch, Ashtorath, Meroth, Sun and the Elohim, but the dramatic fragment itself opens with a dialogue between Lucifer and Sun — Lucifer compelling obedience on the part of Sun — followed by a conversation between Lucifer and Belial, the Angels of Power and Reason respectively. Lucifer puts forward his theory of Divine Growth: the old God must give place to the new, and Lucifer albeit the younger is greater than the "Power from which I sprang; the new excels the old.... For God shall cease and Lucifer be God". It is of course difficult to infer from the fragment how Sri Aurobindo intended to complete the play. Armed with his new insights, Sri Aurobindo seems to have abandoned the drama and reduced it to the Sirioth-Lucifer dialogue — or the confrontation of Power and Love — and authorised its publication as *The Birth of Sin* in the Collected Edition (Volume II) of 1942.

In *The Birth of Sin*, Sirioth and Lucifer discuss the obscure causes of their undivine discontent (or is that also divine?). Lucifer is tired of service, and he desires Power; God the Master has ruled long enough, and Lucifer would like to wrest Power from Him,

And make myself an empire as august,
Enjoy a like eternity of rule.³⁹

³⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p 125

Sirioth advises against rebellion; instead of "eternity of rule" which Lucifer desires, "eternity of dreadful poignant pain" may become his fate! Lucifer would prefer even that to a dull eternity of service driven by pitiless iron necessity. As yet, however, these thoughts of rebellion hover in the region of feeling and have not settled to determined action. On the contrary, Sirioth has other indistinct but irresistible cravings:

But I have felt a touch as sweet as spring,
And I have heard a music of delight
Maddening the heart with the sweet honied stabs
Of delicate intolerable joy.⁴⁰

Lucifer's motive-force for action had in the first instance been the desire to help, to serve, though later the unending monotony of compulsion and subordination had soured him. With Sirioth it had been otherwise.

To embrace, to melt and mix
Two beings into one, to roll the spirit
Tumbling into a surge of common joy, —
'Tis this I seek.

But this — would not this lead to what somebody had called "sin"? When Lucifer and Sirioth — the hunger for Power and the thirst for Love — when the morning and the evening star meet, when revolt meets change in close embrace, "sin" must needs be born into the world. And Sirioth describes the beautiful and terrible vision:

And I beheld as in a dream
Leaping from out thy brain and into mine
A woman beautiful, of grandiose mien,
Yet terrible, alarming and instinct
With nameless menace. And the world was full
With clashing and with cries. It seemed to me

⁴⁰ *ibid* , p. 126.

Angels and Gods and men strove violently
 To touch her robe, to occupy the place
 Her beautiful and ominous feet had trod,
 Crying, "Daughter of Lucifer, be ours,
 O sweet, adorable and mighty Sin!"⁴¹

The dialogue ends vaguely with Lucifer's "We will consult once more what we shall do". This fascinating speculation on the origin of "sin" — Sin the charmer who delights all the hosts of heaven and earth — is a far more attractive version than Milton's in the Second Book of *Paradise Lost* where, when Satan confronts his daughter Sin and their son Death and feels repelled, she reminds him of her origin.

Hast thou forgotten me then, and do I seem
 Now in thine eye so foul, once deemed so fair
 In Heaven, when at the assembly, and in sight
 Of all the Seraphim with thee combined
 In bold conspiracy against Heaven's King,
 All on a sudden miserable pain
 Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy,. .
 Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,
 Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed,
 Out of thy head I sprung?

In Sri Aurobindo's view, of course, every "fall" is a means to a greater rise. In the spiral of involution-evolution, we fall only to rise — are baffled only to fight better — and sleep but to be up and doing again. The union of Power and Love, instead of ending in "sin" and everlasting punishment in one of the circles of Hell, could really be the means of change and growth and transformation, a bringing together and fusion of heaven

⁴¹ *ibid*, p. 127

and earth. But this idea is only suggested in *The Birth of Sin*, not fully set forth.

The Rakshasas is another daring exercise in poetic speculation. The prefatory note explains that the Rakshasa is the "violent kinetic ego" that has displaced the animal soul, and antecedent to the Asura who is the "controlled and intellectualised but unregenerated Ego". But every type and level of consciousness, however crude or imperfect it may be, nevertheless "sees the Divine in its own image". Like Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*, Sri Aurobindo's *The Rakshasas* too is a poetic rendering of a partial or imperfect theology. Caliban imaginatively builds Setebos in his own image —

Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos!

'Thinketh, He dwelleth i' the cold of the moon.

'Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,

But not the stars; the stars came otherwise;

Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that:

Also this isle, what lives, and grows thereon,

And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.

'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:

He hated that He cannot change His cold,

Nor cure its ache...

He made all these and more,

Made all we see, and us, in spite: *how else?*

Grovelling in filthy discomfort, Caliban equates his Setebos with monumental discomfort and views the world as the projection of his sneezing! Ravana, Lord of Lanka, is less crude but not less self-centred and his conception of God is that of a mighty Rakshasa:

O Rakshasa Almighty, look on me,

Ravan, the lord of all Thy Rakshasas,

Give me Thy high command to smite Thy foes;

But most I would afflict, chase and destroy
 Thy devotees who traduce Thee, making Thee
 A God of Love, a God too sweet to rule.⁴²

He has won his right to rule the earth for a term, but only for a term; he has taken an aeon to evolve, and an aeon he may rule; but at last he will be superseded by the Asura, and he too will one day be surpassed by another, by greater Man who will see God in himself and not himself in God, and who will see in existence more than life and body — who will see in it the dimensions of mind and Spirit as well. The Rakshasa, the Asura, and the mental man — these would be the necessary steps on the steep ascent to the summit of the future Man Divine.

Kama is an interesting variation of *The Birth of Sin*. Not Power and Love, but Ignorance and Desire start the grand experiment of Creation. If one passes beyond Ignorance, one beyonds Desire as well: and one beyonds the phenomenal world itself, and returns to the undifferentiated Divine Reality. *Kama* too is a force derived from the Bliss of Brahman, and to be able to master and surpass it is verily to return to the pure ineffable of Brahmananda. *Kama*'s blessings are exciting and sweet enough, and deserve to be enjoyed — enjoyed, but also, ultimately, to be consumed and transcended; and this may be inferred from *Kama*'s own exhortation:

Thou, O solid earth,
 Enter into all life, support the worlds.
 I send forth joy to cheer the hearts of men,
 I send forth law to harmonise and rule.
 And when these things are done, when men have
learned

⁴² *ibid.*, p 133.

My beauty, My desirability, My bliss,
 I will conceal myself from their desire
 And make this rule of the eternal chase,
 "They who abandon Me, shall to all time
 Clasp and possess; they who pursue, shall lose".⁴³

The Mahatmas: Kuthumi is described by Sri Aurobindo as "a play of the imaginative, a poetic reconstruction of the central idea only of Mahatmahood". Kuthumi, the Kshatriya Yogin, having steadily risen in consciousness from birth to birth and gathered the folds of knowledge incommensurable, comes to Vyasa "our great original sage". As directed by the sage, Kuthumi does Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga, each for three days: not the Yogas of our degenerate Kali Age, but the Hatha Yoga of Ravana, Dhruva and of the old Lemurian Kings, and the Raja Yoga of Chakravarti Bali and of the old Atlantic Kings. Directed now by Vyasa to seek out Krishna, make total surrender to Him and then manifest the Divine Truth on earth — an easy task enough till the Iron Age of Kali when the fight against Darkness must prove more and more difficult — Kuthumi finds the Lord concealed in a "hermit mad" and loses himself in Him.

I fell before him... and out of me
 All knowledge, all desire, all strength was gone
 Into its source. I sat an infant child...
 Then full of light and strength and bliss I soared
 Beyond the spheres, above the mighty Gods
 And left my human body on the snows...
 Then to my human frame awhile descend
 And walk mid men, choosing my instruments,
 Testing, rejecting and confirming souls —

⁴³ *ibid* , p 136

Vessels of the Spirit; for the golden age
 In Kali comes, the iron lined with gold,
 The Yoga shall be given back to men,
 The sects shall cease, the grim debates die out
 And atheism perish from the Earth,
 Blasted with knowledge, love and brotherhood
 And wisdom repossess Sri Krishna's world.⁴⁴

It is clearly the Mahatma's destiny — as seen by Kuthumi, one of them — to preserve and activate the Truth age after age till the Truth can possess and transform humanity altogether and make earth an extension to Heaven.

The quartet of poems discussed in this Section, although they were perhaps composed a little later, are really of a piece in spirit with *The Rishi*. They are poetic projections of psychological realities and show the influence of ancient Indian thought on Sri Aurobindo's modern sensibility. The poems, however, may be enjoyed as much for the energy of the thought as for the memorability of the recollection. The language and the rhythm too show a mastery and a potency appropriate everywhere to the movement of thought or play of fancy

V

The bulk of Sri Aurobindo's poetical output during the Baroda period — including some that properly belong to the years immediately following — has now been surveyed, in the present and the three previous chapters, in considerable detail. The many translations from Greek, Bengali and Sanskrit; the metrical romances, *Urvashi* and

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp 139-40.

Love and Death; the heroic poem, *Baji Prabhou*; the dramatic romances and fragments; the many philosophical and spiritually oriented poems — a total of about 25,000 lines of verse, excluding the pieces lost in the “house-searches, trials, hasty displacements and other vicissitudes” of the political period, and also excluding the pieces that lie scattered in magazines and journals or those still lying in manuscript form, not yet deciphered and published. And it should also be remembered that this impressive mass of creative work was the achievement of hardly more than fifteen years of poetical activity when Sri Aurobindo was also simultaneously pursuing the profession of teaching and engaging in secret revolutionary action and, towards the end, in combative journalism and national politics.

What is specially remarkable in these early poems and dramas is Sri Aurobindo's attention to verbal and metrical craftsmanship. A stay of fourteen years in England during the most impressionable years of boyhood and youth had given Sri Aurobindo an impeccable ear for English sound values and an instinctive response to nuances of meaning and rhythm. And a prolonged and intimate familiarity with Greek, Latin and Sanskrit had also facilitated a mastery of regular metrical forms. But he realised at the same time that poetry was not language or metre merely but only used them as its fit vehicle for forceful utterance. As he once remarked, “Poetry, if it deserves the name at all, comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outward mind and other external instruments for transmission only.”⁴⁵ If the inspiration is not urgent enough, or if the metrical craftsmanship is not consummate enough, we have either

⁴⁵ Letter to Amalkiran (K. D. Sethna), quoted in Dilip's *Anami*, p. 275.

verse that is pleasing and faultless or poetry that just misses its name and vocation. As Sri Aurobindo pithily put it, without *bhāva* — without the creative vital itself participating in the poetic creation — all metrical melody can only be a “melodious corpse”.⁴⁶ But whereas the breeze of inspiration bloweth where it listeth, metrical mastery can generally be acquired and pressed into the service of poetic composition. Meanwhile the poet can but wait for the unpredictable moment when inspiration will impinge upon the creative vital and enkindle the mere drybones of verse into the unfading incandescence of poetry.

Sri Aurobindo, it has been claimed, “was born as a poet and he is a born poet”;⁴⁷ but even a born poet cannot always write at the top of his form. Poetry should give us, not a system of thought, but the poetry of thought, not philosophy, but the poetry of philosophy — in other words, thought or structure of ideas touched by emotion and transfigured by the imagination. Even during the Baroda period, Sri Aurobindo frequently achieved this feat of transfiguration. The failures are unimportant, the successes alone should invite our attention and compel our admiration. The true poet is a creator in his own right and in this imitates God’s relation to His creatures. As the Rishi explains to Manu:

The poet from his vast and labouring mind
Brings brilliant out
A living world; forth into space they wind,
The shining rout,
And hate and love, and laugh and weep, enjoy,
Fight and shout,

⁴⁶ Letter to Dilip Kumar Roy.

⁴⁷ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, Publisher’s Note.

King, lord and beggar, tender girl and boy,
 Foemen, friends;
 So to His creatures God's poetic mind
 A substance lends.⁴⁸

In his plays, Sri Aurobindo's own "vast and labouring mind" has brought out worlds of living men and women. And in many a poem, rhythm and phrase are seen to fuse again and again into the splendour of poetic communication. *A Child's Imagination*, that effusion of pure melody, embodies at the same time a nectarean revelation:

O thou golden image,
 Miniature of bliss,
 Speaking sweetly, speaking meetly!
 Every word deserves a kiss!...
 God remembers in thy bosom

All the wonders that He wrought...⁴⁹
 Not less satisfying, and rather more strident in utterance,
 is *To R. (On Her Birthday)*:

The repetition of thy gracious years
 Brings back once more thy natal morn.
 Upon the crest of youth thy life appears, —
 A wave upborne.
 Amid the hundreds thronging Ocean's floor
 A wave upon the crowded sea
 With regular rhythm pushing towards the shore
 Our life must be...⁵⁰

and so on, ten nobly articulate stanzas. The entire poem is sustained by the metaphor of the sea, and this fascination is seen no less in poems like *To the Sea* and *The Sea at Night*. The former has an aggressive cast, for the

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵⁰ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 130.

poet dares the thunderer and offers to "outbellow" its battering waves:

Take me, be
My way to climb the heavens, thou rude great sea.
I will seize thy mane,
O lion, I will tame thee and disdam...
I come, O Sea,
To measure my enormous self with thee.⁵¹

But *The Sea at Night*, an almost perfect lyric in which sound and sense cohere into a purposive unity, is subdued with its circles of widening peace:

The grey sea creeps half-visible, half-hushed,
And grasps with its innumerable hands
These silent walls. I see beyond a rough
Glimmering infinity, I feel the wash
And hear the sibilation of the waves
That whisper to each other as they push
To shoreward side by side, — long lines and dim
Of movement flecked with quivering spots of foam,
The quiet welter of a shifting world.⁵²

The longer poems and the dramatic romances, partly on account of their length and also on account of the unavoidable variation in interest, are not on an even level of inspired utterance throughout. As Sri Aurobindo himself once wrote, summarising "futurist" views on the question: "Length in a poem is itself a sin, for length means padding... a long poem is a bad poem.. only brief work, intense, lyrical in spirit, can be throughout pure poetry".⁵³ On the other hand, Keats has remarked that "a long poem is a test of invention, which I take to be the Pole-star of poetry, as fancy is the sails, and imagination the rudder". Even in Milton's, and certainly

⁵¹ *ibid.*, Vol. I, p 130. ⁵² *ibid.*, p 134 ⁵³ Letter to Dilp

in Wordsworth's, poetic output, stretches of verse can be sighted which, while they may be relevant and serious enough or even eloquent in their own way, may yet fail to touch the electric level of pure poetry. That this is so in the vast body of Sri Aurobindo's verse should be hardly surprising. Passages of impassioned poetry sometimes alternate with passages less indubitably packed with suggestion, and as in *The Rishi*, for example, some of the longer poems fail to maintain throughout the sheer magnificence of the opening. The writer of a long poem, a metrical romance or a blank verse drama can always give us melodious or memorable verse; he can be consistently and effectively articulate; but he may not be able all the time to transport us with the piercing sublime of pure poetry. It is no derogation of Sri Aurobindo's poetic art or craftsmanship to say that such too is our experience when exposed to the whole vast body of his early poetry and verse translations.

As a metrical craftsman, Sri Aurobindo is probably without an equal in Indo-Anglian literature; and not many practitioners of verse among his exact contemporaries in England have given proof of the same facility and dexterity in wielding the instrument of blank verse as is evidenced in *Urvashi*, *Love and Death*, *Baji Prabhou* and the several dramas (including *The Hero and the Nymph*). The late Lytton Strachey aptly compared blank verse to the Djinn in the *Arabian Nights* story: it is either the most tyrannical of masters or the most obedient and efficient of slaves. But one must know the *mantra* of metrical mastery to be able to awe the Djinn into utter obedience — and there is very little doubt that Sri Aurobindo had easy access to the *mantra*,

and hence he could, since the early years at Baroda, command the Djinn's services. Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, they all knew the secret, and they all could breathe into the seeming irregularity of blank verse the norm of iambic rhythm — a norm that permitted a hundred and one fluctuations and yet challengingly remained itself. The shifting caesuras, the unexpected substitutions, the sheer weight of occasional polysyllables, the startling inversions, the stinging wrenched accents, the sense often triumphantly overwhelming and overflowing the metrical pauses, these and other "tricks of the trade" make many a blank verse passage in Sri Aurobindo's poems and plays partake of the character of a symphony that is as contrapuntally rich as it is a beautiful whole. The agonised heart of an Andromeda or Aslaug or of a Pururavas or Ruru finds in blank verse a splendid medium for self-expression, the vaunts and demonic imaginings of Polydaon or Humber, the rages and curses of Cassiopea or Timocles, the sweet-sad virgin ecstasies of Urvashi or Vasavadutta, the exultations and jealousies and distractions of lovers, all, all are conveyed by Sri Aurobindo through his blank verse rhythms, possessing almost always the qualities of flexibility, charm and innate vitality. What K. D. Sethna finds in *Love and Death* is nothing less than a superb mastery, something quite out of the ordinary.

So much modulation and change of pace connect up with the art of Lascelles Abercrombie and Gordon Bottomley. These poets have a more colloquial turn of phrase: Sri Aurobindo, free though he is from making a cult of the precious, is less inclined to the homely than they, but like them he turns his

medium daringly elastic. Where he differs from them is for the better, since he avoids the modern faults arising from a penchant for the colloquial: the flat and the anaemic on the one hand, on the other the crudely impetuous. There is also a more complete harmonisation.⁵⁴

And, generally speaking, Sri Aurobindo's blank verse of the Baroda period — in the context of the late Victorian and early Edwardian era when conformity was more usual than freedom of experiment — was satisfyingly elastic and resilient, the verse of a master quite sure of himself.

At times, Sri Aurobindo's muse throws out gem-like single lines that one might treasure long — or for ever — in one's memory:

O iron-throated vast un pitying sea...⁵⁵

Titanic on the old stupendous hills...⁵⁶

Bridal outpourings of her broken name...⁵⁷

Thundering remote the clamorous Arctic surge...⁵⁸

Looking through all vast time for one brief hour...⁵⁹

She trailed her raiment as the river its foam..⁶⁰

Such lines almost sing themselves out in the chambers of the subconscious long after the poem or passage has been read and all but forgotten. More rarely, one comes across a blank verse paragraph whose architectonics imprint themselves on the fabric of one's memory for ever and for ever. Quite a few such paragraphs have been cited in the preceding chapters, but one more may be given here:

⁵⁴ *The Poetic Genus of Sri Aurobindo*, p 15.

⁵⁵ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 273. ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p 53.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p 95 ⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 146.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, Vol II, p 126 ⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p 72.

In a thin soft eve
 Ganges spread far her multitudinous waves,
 A glimmering restlessness with voices large,
 And from the forests of that half-seen bank
 A boat came heaving over it, white-winged,
 With a sole silent helmsman marble-pale.
 Then Ruru by his side stepped in, they went
 Down the mysterious river and beheld
 The great banks widen out of sight...⁶¹

And, then, like other masters of the epic style, Sri Aurobindo too can make marvellous poetry out of mere proper names

Python and Naga monstrous, Joruthcaru,
 Tuxuc and Vasuki himself, immense,
 Magic Carcotaca all flecked with fire,⁶²

but it is no mere catalogue of the names of fabulous pythons and fearsome snakes. Sri Aurobindo has just waved his wand, invoked the *mantra* of blank verse, and turned what are apparently exotic names into the magic of imperishable poetry. In his passion and in his scholarship, in his classicisms and in his inversions, in his austerity and in his sublimity, in his organ-voiced puissance and in his inspiring solitariness, Sri Aurobindo is the most Miltonic of the Indo-Anglian poets, and yet, Miltonic as he is, he never ceases to be Sri Aurobindo also, — and this is the measure of his distinction as a great English poet.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 103. ⁶² *ibid.*, p. 109.

PART II

PATRIOT AND PROPHET

.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BHAVANI MANDIR

I

Sri Aurobindo's involvement in the evolution of India's destiny was, almost literally, a life-long process. His birth on 15 August 1872 could itself be viewed, in retrospect, as an augury of the coming of independence to India, exactly seventy-five years later, on 15 August 1947. In a narrower sense, however, Sri Aurobindo's active and open participation in Indian politics was of a much shorter duration: a period of no more than three years and a half, from August 1906 when he joined the National College at Calcutta as its Principal to February 1910 when he left for Chandernagore in French India. Of this period, again, a whole year (May 1908 to May 1909) was spent in jail at Alipur when Sri Aurobindo was an under-trial prisoner in connection with the Manicktolla bomb case. Barely thirty months of active politics, yet Sri Aurobindo was destined to change the whole character of political activity in India and set the freedom movement firmly towards the goal of complete national independence.

But of course, both before and even after the hectic Calcutta period, Sri Aurobindo *was* involved in — or at least deeply concerned with — the tenor and tempo of political life in the country (and the world); and whether from behind the scenes as in the Baroda period or from occult planes as in his later years, Sri Aurobindo was always a power, a guiding and activising spirit, for he was verily the true son of the Mother, the sword-arm

of Bhavani Bharati, the creator-spirit of the unfolding New Age. Period-divisions of a human life — especially a life so rich, so many-sided, so incommensurable as Sri Aurobindo's — can only be props of convenience; but real life, like deep underground water, has a continuous flow, and one has to learn to look beneath the sharp surface angularities to be able to infer the oneness of the inner flow and the creative dynamism of the immortal human spirit.

We have seen that, while still in England, Sri Aurobindo had been following the course of events in India by perusing the *Bengalee*, copies of which Dr. Krishnadhan had been mailing regularly from India — with passages underlined that related to the Government's acts of commission or omission. His political consciousness thus awakened, Sri Aurobindo took an active part in the debates of the Indian Majlis at Cambridge, and he also founded the secret society, the "Lotus and Dagger". His interest in the Irish liberation movement under Parnell was, perhaps, a reflection of Sri Aurobindo's increasing concern with the situation in India. And his rejection from the Indian Civil Service — partly manoeuvred by himself and partly provoked by his political activities at Cambridge — opened the way for him to engage in politics, first covertly and later openly, after his return to India in February 1893.

Within a few months of his arrival in India, Sri Aurobindo had begun contributing anonymously the "New Lamps for Old" articles to the *Indu Prakash*, and this he could not have done unless these questions had occupied his mind even in England. A reference to these articles has been made already in an earlier chapter, and we have seen how penetrating was Sri Aurobindo's

analysis of the political situation in India at the time and how trenchant were his comments and criticisms. It was, perhaps, no fortuitous circumstance that, as it were simultaneously, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo — the former at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, the latter in the columns of the *Indu Prakash* — should have both made history, shaking complacency, making people think anew, highlighting the importance of self-knowledge, exhorting people, be it the question of “man-making” or nation-building, “to commence from within and not depend on any exterior agency”.¹ In his first speech, Vivekananda had told the vast congregation: “Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal...” And in his first article, Sri Aurobindo had named our actual enemy, not as any outside force, but rather as our cowardice, our weakness, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our “purblind sentimentalism”. Neither of them had any respect for Congress mendicancy and perorative politics. If Sri Aurobindo condemned the Congress leaders as the one-eyed (if not the totally blind) who were trying to lead the masses, Vivekananda was to tell Aswini Kumar Datta in the course of a conversation:

“Can you tell me what the Congress is doing for the masses? Do you think merely passing a few resolutions will bring you freedom? I have no faith in that. The masses must be awakened... the essence of my religion is strength.... Strength is religion, and nothing is greater than strength.”²

Petitioning and prayer and pseudo-parliamentary postur-

¹ *New Lamps for Old* in the *Indu Prakash*, 30 October 1893.

² *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (by his Eastern and Western Disciples), pp 586-7

ing were unlikely to rid the country of foreign rule and redeem the dumb millions. Sri Aurobindo boldly cited the examples of France and Ireland that had undergone baptismal purification through blood and fire.

It was not a convocation of respectable citizens, but the vast and ignorant proletariat (of France) that emerged from a prolonged and almost coeval apathy and blotted out in five terrible years the accumulated oppression of thirteen centuries.... Is it at all true that the initiators of Irish resistance to England were a body of successful lawyers, remarkable only for a power of shallow rhetoric, and deputised by the sort of men that are turned out at Trinity College, Dublin?... Just as the main strength of that strenuous protest resided in the Irish populace led by the princes of their class, so the principal force of the modern subtler protest resides in the Irish peasantry led by the recognised chiefs of a united people.³

Even when, after this series of incendiary political articles had been discontinued, Sri Aurobindo wrote for the *Indu Prakash* on a more subdued key a set of seven essays (signed "by a Bengali") on Bankim Chandra Chatterji, although the interest was mainly literary, the political slant too revealed itself sharply, for example in a passage like the following:

Calcutta is yet a stronghold of the Philistines; officialdom is honeycombed with anti-national tradition; in politics and social reform, the workings of the new movement are yet obscure... (but) already we see the embryo of a new generation soon to be with us, whose imagination Bankim has

³ *Indu Prakash*, 18 September 1893.

caught and who care not for Keshub Chunder Sen and Kristo Das Pal, a generation national to a fault.... With that generation the future lies and not with the Indian Unnational Congress or the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Already its vanguard is upon us.... Let it only be true to itself and we shall do yet more marvellous things in the future than we have done in the past.⁴

Even the grand achievement of ancient Greece where once occurred "an unbroken succession of supreme geniuses" might now be repeated in India, and for this to happen "all we need is not to tie ourselves down to a false ideal, not to load our brains with the pedantry of a false education, but to keep like those first builders a free intellect and a free soul".⁵

II

During the next few years, say from 1894 to 1899, Sri Aurobindo was more or less absorbed (apart from his official duties) in studies and writing: explorations, translations, original poems, critical essays. From 1899 or 1900 onwards, Sri Aurobindo began in earnest a work — secret revolutionary organisation — that was as yet "nameless". He was drawn to Yoga too, but not for the usual reasons, but with a view to success in politics. It is thus hardly surprising that the writings of the Baroda period should show up here and there the sharp edges of his current political and revolutionary preoccupations.

It was seen earlier that Sri Aurobindo's *Urvasie*, *Love*

⁴ *ibid*, 27 August 1894, reprinted in *Bankim Chandra Chatterji*, pp 44-6.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 49.

and Death, Baji Prabhou, Chitrangada and Vidula are not merely notable for their evocative power, but they are also poems — or translations — with a purpose. How shall man conduct himself on what seems to be no better than the constant challenge of “life’s scaffold”? The challenge taken for granted, how was manly man to meet it, master it and exceed it? Love like Pururavas’ for Urvasie or Ruru’s for Priyumvada was a marvellous and glorious experience, but even such love by itself was not enough! The individual might find his felicity, but only at the cost of the greater good of the community, the country, or future humanity. To be able to serve others, not solely oneself, one must acquire the larger vision and the capacity for self-abnegation that makes one ready to sacrifice one’s personal happiness, one’s very life even, at the altar of a noble cause. Pururavas failed; Ruru failed; Sunjoy was weak and miserable. They failed their people, they failed Bharat; and Sunjoy wished to seek ignoble ease in preference to possible death in battle. There was no doubt a touch of greatness in Pururavas and Ruru, for they were willing to give up everything to regain an Urvasie or a Priyumvada; yet in the larger national, human or evolutionary context, they were not great enough. But Chitrangada was able to see her lover Arjuna in his heroic role of fighter and conqueror, and not only she did not try to hold him back, she actually encouraged and almost induced him to break away from the bonds of love and fare forward seeking avenues of heroic action. Baji Prabhou, of course, was a pure flame of sacrifice that won the day for Shivaji —

Thirty and three the gates

By which thou enterest heaven, thou fortunate soul,

Thou valiant heart.⁶

As regards Sri Aurobindo's plays, they too are unmissably dyed with purpose. Eric is Norway's unifier, but he sees the wisdom of balancing the claims of Thor and Odin with those of Freya — in other words, of Power and Love. Bappa the Prince of Edur is both liberator and redeemer, and regains his Kingdom as well as wins a bride in Kamal Kumari. In the maturer play, *Perseus the Deliverer*, Sri Aurobindo projected his dialectical idea of progress through the Poseidon-Pallas Athene confrontation as played in terrestrial Syria by Polydaon and the sea monster on the one hand and Andromeda and Perseus on the other. Translated in general terms, the Asuric and Divine forces wage a fierce war through willing instruments; but the Divine must ultimately triumph over the Asuric, and thus evolutionary advance and progress is an assured thing. This cosmic struggle between these opposed forces is particularised, now with greater now with lesser intensity, in individual human conflicts or more wide-spread conflicts between whole nations and peoples. When giant forces join issue in this manner, people usually pin their faith in a Messiah, an Avatar, a divine-human personality. Perseus is presented as such a power and personality; he is, one might say,

the divine Seer-Will descending upon the human consciousness to reveal to it the divine meaning behind our half-blind action and to give along with the vision the exalted will that is faithful and performs and the ideal force that executes according to the vision.⁷

And yet, transcending both the individual and cosmic

⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol II, p. 115

⁷ *Ideals and Progress* (1922), p. 15.

conflicts, Reality is for ever the same; "All alters in a world that is the same". Both the horror of the conflict and the peaceful close of its periodical resolution are but interlocked terms of the unescapable Law of Becoming. The same promise is held out also in a poem of the Baroda period, *In the Moonlight*:

The old shall perish, it shall pass away,
Expunged, annihilated, blotted out;
And all the iron bands that ring about
Man's wide expansion shall at last give way...

This is man's progress; for the Iron Age
Prepares the Age of Gold. What we call sin,
Is but man's leavings as from deep within
The Pilot guides him in his pilgrimage.^s

It should be clear from all this that Sri Aurobindo was profoundly preoccupied, even when he was fully engaged in his exacting official duties or in the tasks of teaching or in the ardours of poetic composition, with *other* things as well, more important things — the problem of ends and means, the existential problem of right aspiration and right action, the evolutionary problem of storming through the shocks of difficulty to the far peak of realisation. From the very first, the idea of individual felicity or personal salvation did not seem to Sri Aurobindo anything like a supreme or even worthwhile aim; a freak isolated salvation that left the world to its fate was positively distasteful to him. No doubt he would read and he would think and he would write poetry, he would ponder and he would plan and he would strive — but on whose behalf? and to what end?

^s *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol I, pp. 169-70.

Not for his own sake — he was very sure about that; for whose sake, then?

Years later, Sri Aurobindo was to declare: "The Yoga we practise is not for ourselves alone, but for humanity. Its object is not personal *mukti* (salvation)... but the liberation of the human race".⁹ At about the same time, recapitulating his political days he wrote to a friend:

I entered into political action and continued it from 1905 to 1910 with one aim and one alone: to get into the mind of the people a settled will for freedom and the necessity of a struggle to achieve it, in place of the futile ambling methods till then in vogue.¹⁰

In the first years after his return to India, it had appeared to Sri Aurobindo that his duty lay in prodding his countrymen — especially his brothers and sisters in Bengal — from their all too humiliating stupor. An alien rule had brought in its equipage an entirely new set of values which had with fatal ease and all too quickly become the ruling ideas of the Indian intelligentsia. Not merely Bengal, but the whole of India, was "drunk with the wine of European civilisation, and with the purely intellectual teaching that it received from the West. It began to see all things, to judge all things, through the imperfect instrumentality of the intellect. When it was so, Bengal (and, let us add, all India) became atheistic, it became a land of doubters and cynics".¹¹ The newly-educated Indian — especially if he happened to be an "England-returned" gentleman as

⁹ *The Yoga and Its Objects* (1921, reprinted 1931), p. 5.

¹⁰ Letter to Joseph Baptista, dated 5 January 1920.

¹¹ *Speeches* by Sri Aurobindo, p. 9.

well — became a ridiculous perversion of his European contemporary; as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan has pointed out, “his voice became an echo, his life a quotation, his soul a brain, and his free spirit a slave to things”. Deformed though such people were in the physiognomy of their mind and soul, they would not admit — they could not even recognise — the fact; rather, as with the followers of Comus,

so perfect is their misery,

Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,

And boast themselves more comely than before.¹²

Sri Aurobindo revolved these things in his mind and deplored the apathy, the selfishness, the frivolity, the superficiality and the cynicism that seemed to have so completely mastered the intellect and the sensibility of the average educated Indian, and although the rot had been arrested somewhat by the stupendous spiritual phenomenon of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, still a great deal remained to be done. The paramount need was a movement of regeneration and a return to sanity, strength and national self-respect. But how was this movement to be initiated, engineered and brought to a triumphant conclusion? The *Indu Prakash* articles were but transient ripples on the placid waters of Indian political life. The poems and dramas were partly exercises in self-exploration and partly a necessary means of significant self-expression. These were but preliminary assaults or tentative essays that perhaps helped to decipher the magnitude of the opposing forces or to define the directions of counter-action and liberation. The difficulty, however, was in choosing the moment for effective action. Sri Aurobindo knew well enough that “a man capable of self-sacrifice,

¹² Milton, *Comus*, ll. 73-5.

whatever his other sins, has left the animal behind him; he has the stuff in him of a future and higher humanity";¹³ and having long rigorously tested himself on the anvil of privation and suffering, it was a mere item of self-knowledge for him that he wouldn't flinch from the extremest trial when the time came. He knew too that "a nation capable of a national act of self-sacrifice ensures its future".¹⁴ The crucial question was whether the Indian nation was as yet capable of such a national act of self-sacrifice. The old mood of slothful complacency and lazy acquiescence in foreign rule was still dominant enough in 1893 and for several years afterwards. But although Sri Aurobindo had for the time being withdrawn into silence, not for a second did he abandon his hope of an eventual effective action in the political sphere.

III

When Sri Aurobindo went to Bengal about the turn of the century "to see what was the hope of revival, what was the political condition of the people, and whether there was the possibility of a real movement", what he actually found there was "that the prevailing mood was apathy and despair. People had believed that regeneration could only come from outside, that another nation would take us up by the hand and lift us up", and there was nothing we had ourselves to do!¹⁵ That illusion had to go, and go it would some day. But was it wise on Sri Aurobindo's part to sit meanwhile with folded hands,

¹³ *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 34 ¹⁵ *Speeches*, p. 15.

waiting patiently (or pathetically) for the auspicious moment when the country — the slumbering Indian nation — got ready for action? The people had first to be awakened to the triune lights of self-respect, self-reliance and resolute cooperative action. It was mentioned in an earlier chapter (III.v) that Sri Aurobindo sent Jatin Banerjee in 1898 or 1899 to establish contacts with the scattered few revolutionary groups in Bengal, that Sri Aurobindo had himself followed later to bring the groups together when they tried to pull in different directions, that his younger brother Barindra had tried to establish a chain of samitis and youth organisations in the villages of Bengal, that Bal Gangadhar Tilak had likewise brought about an awakening in Maharashtra through the institution of Ganapati Festivals, that Sri Aurobindo found an unexpected ally in Sister Nivedita for his revolutionary work, and that he had (on K. G. Deshpande's advice) tried to seek through Yoga an accession of strength for political work. Yoga and rifle-practice may seem to us an odd combination, but once at least in Sri Aurobindo's life, this seems to have come about. Among the early influential converts to the revolutionary cause was the young I. C. S. officer, Charu Chandra Dutt, whom Sri Aurobindo met at Thana early in 1904,¹⁶ and on one of his visits an interesting event took place which may be described in the host's own words:

It was raining heavily on that day. As we could not stir out, we fell to target-shooting to beguile the time. My wife proposed that Sri Aurobindo

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo met C.C. Dutt first at the Baroda Railway platform by chance, and told him while parting: "Now that we are both in Gujarat, we are sure to see each other often" (C.C. Dutt's article in the *Sunday Times*, 17 December 1950).

should be given the rifle so that he might also have a try, but Sri Aurobindo refused, saying that he had never handled a rifle. But because we insisted, he agreed. We had only to show him how to hold the rifle and take aim. The target was the black, tiny head of a match-stick, hung at a distance of ten or twelve feet. Sri Aurobindo took aim, and, lo and behold! the very first shot flew slick into the target, and the first hit was followed up by the second, and the second by the third! It took our breath away. I remarked to my friends: 'If such a man doesn't become a *siddha*, who would become?'¹⁷

Sri Aurobindo had once failed to pass the Riding Test, but there would be no more failures now, for wasn't Yoga, after all, "skill in works?" It is to C. C. Dutt too that we owe another anecdote that throws an equally revealing light on Sri Aurobindo's capacity for concentration. While some of his friends were engaged in a game of chess, Sri Aurobindo picked up a novel and started reading it, but put it down after half an hour, as if he had finished it. On being now subjected to a *viva voce* test, Sri Aurobindo was able to satisfy them that he had indeed read the book and fully mastered its contents. How shall we explain this except by citing again the *mahāvākya*, *yogah karmasu kauśalam*?

Apart from his adroit incursions into the world of secret revolutionary activity and his rather calculated moves towards organising the people for an eventual armed insurrection, — and this meant, not only forging the required instruments of propaganda and collective

¹⁷ *Puranokatha-Upasanhara* (Bengali), quoted in the *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* (XIII, 2), April 1961, pp. 158, 160.

action, but also fishing unerringly for ardent adherents like C. C. Dutt and Jogendranath Mukherji even from the ranks of Government officials, — Sri Aurobindo began taking counsel with the more advanced political leaders in the country so that the Congress could be first pushed from behind and then, when the time was opportune, the “moderate” leadership displaced by the vanguard men. In 1902, he attended the Ahmedabad session of the Congress, and once Lokamanya Tilak (who had been among the first to be impressed by the *New Lamps for Old* articles of 1893) took Sri Aurobindo out of the pandal “and talked to him for an hour in the grounds expressing his contempt for the Reformist movement and explaining his own line of action in Maharashtra”.¹⁸ Tilak seemed to Sri Aurobindo “the one possible leader for a revolutionary party”, an impression that was only to be confirmed by future developments. Sri Aurobindo also attended the Bombay Congress (1904) and the Benares (Varanasi) Congress (1905), and tried to bring together the few like-minded leaders who were prepared to fight for nothing less than *swaraj* or complete independence free of all foreign control. With a view to reinforcing his plea for “independence” (as against some attenuated form of colonial self-government), Sri Aurobindo seems at this time to have written a forthright pamphlet entitled *No Compromise*, which at first no printer was willing to handle. Barindra’s friend, Abinash Bhattacharya, secured the necessary type, stick, case and other things and had the matter composed secretly by a Marathi young man, Kulkarni, and printed overnight in an oblique press. The copies were widely distributed, and Surendranath Banerjea, on being given a copy, wondered who

¹⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p 45

the writer could be, for he thought that it was not possible for an Indian to write such English, with such a bold and striking presentation of facts and arguments. On being told who the author was, Surendranath is said to have exclaimed that Sri Aurobindo alone could have written it.¹⁹

The word 'Swaraj' itself had first been used by Sakharān Ganesh Deuskar, one of the ablest members of the Bengali revolutionary groups, in his popular biography of Shrivaji in Bengali. He also wrote, on Sri Aurobindo's suggestion, *Deshar Katha*, a book giving in overwhelming detail the sordid story of foreign exploitation leading to India's economic servitude, and this book seems to have had an enormous influence on the young men of Bengal and turned many of them into revolutionaries and prepared them for the Swadeshi movement. Swaraj and Swadeshi thus came to be linked together, and to these were added a vitriolic third ingredient, Boycott of British goods, and these three formed the base-plank of the programme of the secret revolutionary organisation, whose aim of course was to make the programme adopted by the Congress and the nation as a whole. The magic word 'Swaraj' was later popularised by the Bengali paper, *Sandhya*, edited by Brahmabandhup Upadhyaya. At the Calcutta Congress (1906), Dadabhai Naoroji—"in an inspired moment"—described "self-government" as *swaraj*, at once conferring official recognition on the word and also, in some measure, containing its connotation. But the term soon broke out of the container, and it was left to Sri Aurobindo to use the unambiguous English equivalent "independence" and reiterate it constantly in

¹⁹ From Abinash Bhattacharya's *Galpa Bharati* (cited in Keshavmurti's *Sri Aurobindo—The Hope of Man*, 1969, pp. 60-1).

his articles and speeches as the one and immediate aim of national politics.

Secret revolutionary propaganda and preparation: a more overt collaboration with nationalist leaders like Tilak and a behind-the-scenes jostling with a view to converting the Congress to the new programme of Swaraj-Swadeshi-Boycott: and, finally, the nation-wide mobilisation of the people's idealisms and energies through a movement of non-cooperation and passive resistance on the issue of immediate national independence — these were the three levels of Sri Aurobindo's political thinking and activity, at first distinct enough from one another, but really meant to coalesce, sooner or later, into a single "Triveni", facilitating our baptism of rebirth as a new nation and a new people. Sri Aurobindo did not think that the first (secret revolutionary action) would by itself be effective in a subcontinent like ours "if there were not also a wide public movement which would create a universal patriotic fervour and popularise the idea of independence as the ideal and aim of Indian politics".²⁰ He had studied with interest the history of the freedom movements in mediaeval France, and in latter-day America, France, Ireland and Italy, and he learnt a good deal from those movements, and from their leaders as well — notably Joan of Arc and Mazzini.²¹ Sri Aurobindo admired Parnell too and wrote poems about him, but the kind of Parliamentary activity that was possible for the Parnellites was ruled out for the Indian revolutionaries. In effect, perhaps, Sri Aurobindo's movement was more like the Irish Sinn Fein, but had actually preceded it. While in public Sri Aurobindo advocated non-cooperation and passive resistance as the means

²⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 31. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 33.

to Swaraj, and no doubt hoped that things might turn out that way, he also shrewdly kept in reserve the weapon of secret revolutionary activity to be brought in to the open and used to clinching effect when all else failed. He knew that India was indeed woefully unarmed, but on a balance of probabilities it seemed to him — this was almost seventy years ago! — that “in so vast a country as India and with the smallness of the regular British armies, even a guerilla warfare accompanied by general resistance and revolt might be effective”.²² Besides, from his intuitive knowledge of British character, Sri Aurobindo had the feeling that, driven to a corner, the “alien” rulers — unlike, for example, the Russians — would try to salvage what they could, and “in an extremity prefer to grant independence rather than have it forcefully wrested from their hands”.²³

Such were Sri Aurobindo's ideas and activities (secret and open), such were his plans and hopes, such his far-sighted vision of the unfolding future possibility. To the outside world, he was still a Professor of English at the Baroda College, and presently its Vice-Principal, and for a time its Acting Principal. But poetry, politics and Yoga were the ruling elements within, and meantime he waited, — and even when he was ready and poised for action, he watched and waited, for he knew the “Hour of God” was approaching, the phoenix hour of the nation's unfurling destiny.

IV

Sri Aurobindo's younger brother, Barindra, was like an orbiting planet round the Sun that was the elder bro-

²² *ibid.*, p. 39. ²³ *ibid.*, p. 39

ther. Barindra was born in England, and while still a boy lost his father and was denied a mother's constant affection and solicitude. He first leaned on his sister Sarojini, but from early years he had also a mind and a style of his own. After passing the Entrance examination, he joined the Patna College, then moved to the Dacca College where his brother Manomohan Ghose was Professor of English; giving up his studies a few months hence, Barin toyed with agriculture, then ran a tea-shop at Patna, and at last made a bee-line to Baroda where he arrived one morning in 1901 "with a dirty canvas bag and very dirty clothes". After a bath, he was presentable enough, and made a fourth in the family, with Sri Aurobindo, his wife Mrinalini, and his sister Sarojini already there.²⁴

Barin, however, had even earlier caught the revolutionary "virus", and he reached Baroda at a time when Sri Aurobindo was fast sending out his revolutionary tentacles to remote Bengal. Barin too took the customary oath before Sri Aurobindo, with the unsheathed sword in one hand and a copy of the Gita in the other:

As long as there is life in me and as long as India is not liberated from her chains of subjection, I will carry on the work of revolution. If at any time I disclose a single word or a single event of the Society or harm it in any way, it shall be at the cost of my own life.

With his inborn enthusiasm that jumped at exciting possibilities and courted danger and unpredictability, Barin was game for anything, and in fact he was ready to canter when Sri Aurobindo wanted him only to run.

During his stay at Baroda, Barindra who had been

²⁴ Purani, *Life*, p. 70.

reading about the then widely popular phenomenon of "Spiritualism" started experimenting with planchette writing, table tapping and mediumistic communication. Sri Aurobindo sometimes joined the seances, partly out of amusement and partly as an experiment worth watching that tried to break the barriers between life and death. Among the persons or spirits for whom Barin acted as medium was his own father Dr. Krishnadhan, and once when Tilak was present, and on being asked what kind of man the Lokamanya was, the answer came: "When all your (Sri Aurobindo's) work will be ruined and many men will bow their heads down, this man will keep his head erect". This was an anticipation of the greatness of Tilak's compelling eminence after the first suppression of the nationalist movement and his solitary confinement at Mandalay. In after-years, Sri Aurobindo testified to Barin's "very extraordinary automatic writing at Baroda in a very brilliant and beautiful English style and remarkable for certain predictions which came true and statements of fact which also proved to be true although unknown to the - persons concerned or any one else present".²⁵

On another occasion, Ramakrishna Paramahansa was called, and after a long silence his spirit seems to have said (as recorded by Barin), "*Mandir gado! Mandir gado!* (Make a temple! Make a temple!)"²⁶ Such disclosures were intriguing and tantalising enough, and Sri Aurobindo was to make further experiments, both at Calcutta and at Pondicherry, before reaching the final conclusion that "though there are sometimes phenomena which point to the intervention of beings of another plane... the mass of such writings comes from a drama-

²⁵ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 108-9 ²⁶ *Purani, Life*, p. 71.

tising element in the subconscious mind".²⁷ Commenting on these phenomena of mediumistic writing or speaking, Nolini Kanta Gupta has also remarked:

There are worlds upon worlds in a regular series, from the most gross to the most subtle.... Any of the beings from any of these worlds or planes can manifest himself. But he has to manifest through the instrumentality of the human medium, through the substance of the medium's mind, life and body.... Very often it is the make-up of the medium that predominates and the being that manifests preserves very little of its own.²⁸

A sensitive and honest medium is one thing, but with an impure and dishonest medium charlatanism must take full control.

Since Barin himself was an unusual and extremely sensitive medium, what did the Paramahansa mean by "*Mandir gado!* Make a temple!" One more temple added to so many in the country? A special kind of temple? Or did he merely mean that one should make one's body itself a temple for the indwelling spirit? Sri Aurobindo himself interpreted "Make a temple!" in later years as Sri Ramakrishna's "command to make in ourselves a temple for the Mother, to effect such a transformation of ourselves that we become the temple of the Mother".²⁹ What was wanted was not a mortal material edifice but an ineluctable imperishable spiritual abode for the Mighty Mother, Mother Free! And yet it is hardly a matter for surprise that, the place, time and circumstances being what they were, the message *Mandir gado!* should have seemed to Barin a corroboration of

²⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 109. ²⁸ *Reminiscences* (1969), p. 38.

²⁹ *Purani, Life*, p. 71.

his intuition that the one thing necessary for the effective propagation of the new revolutionary gospel was a Temple consecrated to the Divine Mother, a Temple invoking Mother India as Bharat Shakti, as Bhavani Bharati. Sri Aurobindo fell in with the idea, which was to find a solitary place somewhere among the hills and erect the proposed temple there and train a band of sannyasins solemnly dedicated to the task of liberating the country from foreign rule. Barin himself set out to find a suitable site in the Vindhya, but caught a malignant fever while wandering among the Amarkantak hills, abandoned his search and returned to Baroda, where he was cured (as mentioned in an earlier chapter) by a Naga sannyasi. But the idea of a Temple for the Divine Mother persisted, and indeed won numerous adherents who were aflame with enthusiasm for the project. Some like Haribhau Modak and Kakasaheb Patil, however, wanted the purely religious part of the project dropped but greater emphasis laid on the collection of arms and the manufacture of bombs.³⁰ When C. C. Dutt demurred that the scheme seemed to hinge too much on Yoga, Sri Aurobindo is said to have laughed and said: "Your aim and ours are exactly the same. Why not look upon the ochre garb as a uniform?"³¹ It was Charu Dutt too who accompanied Sri Aurobindo and K. G. Deshpande when they visited the Ashram at Ganganath where a school called "Bharati Vidyalaya" was run by Swami Rakshananda.³² The boys in the school received spiritual as well as secular education, and there was some considerable stress on physical training as well — team games, drill,

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 78 ³¹ Sisirkumar Mitra, *The Liberator* (1954), p. 50.

³² *ibid.*, pp. 47-8. (The account is from C.C. Dutt's *Puranakatha-Upasanhara*)

marching, attack-and-defence with bamboo sticks — supervised by a retired Havildar. On Sri Aurobindo's part, *Bhavani Mandir* was the result, a piece of writing done probably in 1905, and better described as a tiny packet of political and spiritual dynamite that was to cause endless nightmares to high British officials in Bengal, but was to prove, on the contrary, a mighty inspiration and supreme driving force to countless revolutionaries.

The worship of the Divine Mother, as Durga, as Kali, as Lakshmi — or in anyone of her many manifestations — comes down from very ancient times, and is even now universal in India; and of particular significance is the worship of Mahalakshmi, otherwise known as Mahishasuramardini or Destroyer of the demon Mahisha the bull-faced — a phenomenal victory that occurred in far past times and is still annually recapitulated during the Dussera celebrations all over India. The induction of fighting sannyasins into the Temple may seem a novel feature, but for this too there have been precedents as well as anticipations. In Assam centuries ago, some of the followers of Madhava Deva, the Mayamariyas, took to fighting and suffered persecution and martyrdom. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, different bands of sannyasins organised guerilla or open warfare against the British in places so widespread as Dacca, Coochbehar, Saran, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Rungpur, and "in most of these encounters they used to carry the day", and so much of a menace they were that Warren Hastings wrote in 1773: "These sannyasins appear so suddenly in towns or villages that one would think they had dropped from the blue. They are strong, brave, and energetic beyond belief".³³ And, of course, the Mutiny of 1857 had among

³³ From Jadugopal Mukhopadhyaya's *Viplavi Jivner Smriti* (Bengali) as

its leaders quite a few sannyasins and Gurus who swayed the population against the British rulers.

It is possible that Bankim Chandra's most famous novel, *Ananda Math* (1882), usually cited as the main inspiration behind the 'Bhavani Mandir' scheme, was itself inspired by the sannyasins' revolt of 1772 at Rungpur. That Bankim's novels generally, and *Ananda Math* in particular, exercised a potent influence on Sri Aurobindo may be inferred both from his early articles in the *Indu Prakash* (1894) and his 1907 essay on 'Rishi Bankim' in the columns of the *Bande Mataram*. It is almost as though Sri Aurobindo is drawing our attention to the filiations between 'Bhavani Mandir' and 'Ananda Math':

The Mother of his (Bankim's) vision held trenchant steel in her twice seventy million hands and not the bowl of the mendicant. It was the gospel of fearless strength and force which he preached under a veil and in images in *Ananda Math* and *Devi Chaudhurani*.... He perceived that the first element of the moral strength (that alone can sustain outer force) must be *tyāga*, complete self-sacrifice for the country.... His workers and fighters for the motherland are political *byrāgees*.... Whoever loves self or wife or child or good more than his country is a poor and imperfect patriot; not by him shall the great work be accomplished. Again, he perceived that the second element of the moral strength needed must be self-discipline and organisation. This truth he expressed in the elaborate training of Devi Chaudhurani for her work, in the strict rules of the Association of the 'Ananda Math' and in the pic-

cited in English in the *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* (XIII, 3), April 1961, p. 124 fn.

tures of perfect organisation which those books contain. Lastly, he perceived that the third element of moral strength must be the infusion of religious feeling into patriotic work.... In *Ananda Math* this idea is the keystone of the whole book and received its perfect lyrical expression in the great song (*Bande Mataram*) which has become the national anthem of United India.³⁴

Actually the song had been composed seven or eight years before the novel was written, but finds an appropriate place in it as the *mantra* of the sannyasins and helps them to challenge the might of the Muslim rulers and the British traders, as other sannyasins had fought the British over a century earlier.

There was, finally, the example of Swami Vivekananda who, viewing from a jutting rock off Cape Comorin as if in a mood of trance the whole mass of Indian humanity famished and hungry and ignorant, had asked himself whether a new order of sannyasins couldn't be trained to take the message of modern science and education, with accessories like maps, globes, cameras and other instruments to the millions in the villages, even (or particularly) to the so-called chandalas (untouchables). In the past, sannyasins had wandered wide and far and imparted religious instruction, helping the people to cultivate the garden of the spirit. But the hungry people had to be fed first, and freed from squalor, disease and ignorance, before one could think of ministering to their spiritual needs. Hence the need, Vivekananda thought, for the new order of sannyasins he had in mind. The human image in India had shrunk pitifully, and the collective image of the Virat Purusha

³⁴ *Bankim—Tilak—Dayananda* (1955 edition), pp. 10-1.

had suffered too; perhaps the *sannyasins*, *brahmacharins*, the *parivrajakas* may be able to meet the challenge and set things right again.

Well, 'Bhavani Mandir' was meant to train sannyasins too, who would then carry political education and revolutionary action into the country. Barin seems to have told the advocate, R. N. Patkar, that "a message from the Goddess has been received with detailed instructions"³⁵; but this must have been an exaggeration. Even without the planchette and Sri Ramakrishna's peremptory *Mandir gado!*, 'Bhavani Mandir' would have issued forth in panoply of shining gold, calling young men to glorious unselfish action, for it was the very atmosphere of the troubled times that asked for noble idealism and great sacrifices. There had been talk of the "partition" of Bengal in the air for quite some time, and now the Act was on the anvil of the legislature, and the hated evil was soon to become an accomplished fact. This was the approaching Hour of God, this was the ripening Phoenix Hour. Sri Aurobindo seized the opportunity and turned his pamphlet on 'Bhavani Mandir' into a veritable *Brahmastra* or secret weapon to fight the British. It was not Barin's revolutionary fervour nor his evangelical drive, but rather the intensity of Sri Aurobindo's Vision of the Mother and the winged power of his writing that made *Bhavani Mandir* a decisive blow struck on the Mother's behalf and — incidentally — such a classic in India's political literature.

³⁵ Purani, *Life*, p. 83

V

"A temple is to be erected and consecrated to Bhavani the Mother, among the hills". Thus begins the unique document.³⁶ Bhavani is the Mother, the Infinite Energy that "looms up in the vision of man in various aspects and infinite forms. Each aspect creates and marks an age". Love, Knowledge, Power, Strength characterise different ages as the dominant aspect of the Mother, and she reveals herself, now as Radha the Beloved, and at other times as Lakshmi, Kali, Bhavani — and each may assume for us a multiplicity of forms. In our age, the Mother's characteristic aspect is Shakti, or masterful strength; in this aspect her name is Bhavani. Modern science and technology, increasing as they do in geometric progression (the doubling period being ten years), make our world an unbelievable dynamo of accelerating strength:

All is growing large and strong. The Shakti of war, the Shakti of wealth, the Shakti of science are tenfold more mighty and colossal, a hundredfold more fierce, rapid and busy in their activity, a thousandfold more prolific in resources, weapons and instruments than ever before in recorded history. Everywhere the Mother is at work... remoulding, creating. She is pouring Her spirit into the old; She is whirling into life the new.

It is only in India that the pace is slow. *Tamas* or le-

³⁶ This secret document was discovered and brought to light by Surendra Mohan Ghose and was first published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* (1956) and has been reprinted in Purani's *Life* and Keshavmurti's *Sri Aurobindo—The Hope of Man*. I have spelt 'Bhavani' instead of 'Bhawani' throughout

thargy has taken possession of us, and there is no will to achieve an accession of strength: "We have abandoned Shakti and are therefore abandoned by Shakti. The Mother is not in our hearts, in our brains, in our arms". In education, in religion, in society, in industry, everywhere and in everything our efforts are weak and vacillating, and although "our beginnings are mighty... they have neither sequel nor fruit".

Haven't we here knowledge enough, *śāstras* enough, accumulated during countless ages? But lacking the ignition of Shakti, they have become mere lumber, almost a deadweight. Like the old knowledge, the new knowledge from the West too is for us mere dead-sea fruit, unassimilated and unassimilable. Brazen mimicry of England, or mimicry of Japan, — how far can this take us? "The mighty force of knowledge which European science bestows is a weapon for the hands of a giant, it is the mace of Bhimsen; what can a weakling do with it but crush himself in the attempt to wield it?"

Can it be that we have failed in love? — we who live in the land where, from Kamarupa to Dwaraka and from Himavant to Kumari, we have for ages floated and laved in heady streams of Bhakti! But without Shakti the fuel, how are Bhakti's tongues of flame to leap in abandon? The *ādhāra* has become brittle and weak, the physical base has become insecure, the vital fire has exhausted itself. Without a renewal of strength and energy, how is the light to be lit again? The present decrepitude that has spread over the body and mind of the people — and hence of the nation — must be arrested, and a rejuvenation effectively induced. Under present conditions, people grow senile all too soon; in an emergency they are unable to act decisively, but are content to "hesitate,

ponder, discuss, make tentative efforts and abandon them, or wait for the safest and easiest way to suggest itself.... Our race has grown just such an old man with stores of knowledge, with ability to feel and desire, but paralysed by senile sluggishness, senile timidity, senile feebleness". The dark and heavy pall of *tamas* covers and confines us — as if in a tomb. And it will be death indeed if we cannot — if we will not — cast this shroud aside and spring into life and action. Have seers blest and mighty prophets like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda occurred in vain? Don't we remember Vivekananda's ringing exhortation:

My India, arise! Where is your vital force?... If any nation attempts to throw off its national vitality, the direction which has become its own through the transmission of centuries, that nation dies...

Again, on another occasion:

Your Bhakti is sentimental nonsense which makes one impotent.... Who cares for your Bhakti and Mukti?... I will go into a thousand hells cheerfully if I can rouse my countrymen, immersed in *tamas*, to stand on their feet and be *men* inspired with the spirit of Karma Yoga.

My India, arise! But how? And what is India our mother-country? Without ambiguity comes Sri Aurobindo's answer:

It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhavani Mahishamardini sprang into being from the Shakti of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India,

Bhavani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred million people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of *tamas*, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons.

But if we could awaken the God within, if everyone — “from the Raja on his throne to the coolie at his labour, from the Brahmin absorbed in his *sandhyā* to the Pariah walking shunned of men” — if everyone could manifest the living God, then indeed the whole nation would be able to enact Almighty Power here and now.

Again, India must shake off her lethargy and rise to her true stature, not for her own sake alone, but even for the world's sake, for she has a role to play in the evolution of earth's destiny which no other nation can:

...it is to India that is reserved the highest and the most splendid destiny, the most essential to the future of the human race. It is she who must send forth from herself the future religion of the entire world, the Eternal religion which is to harmonise all religion, science and philosophies and make mankind one soul....

By reaffirming the truths of Shintoism and drawing inspiration from the Vedantic teachings of Oyomei, Japan had arisen from the sleep of centuries and asserted her strength against the sprawling might of Tsarist Russia. It is India's turn to repeat — and more than repeat — that miraculous rebaptism in the waters of Shakti:

Strength can only be created by drawing it from the internal and inexhaustible reservoirs of the Spirit, from that Adya-Shakti of the Eternal which is the fountain of all new existence. To be born again means nothing but to revive the Brahma within us, and that is a spiritual process — no

effort of the body or the intellect can compass it. The three things needful are, firstly, a temple for the Mother, the white Bhavani, the Mother of strength, a temple "in a high and pure air steeped in calm and energy"; secondly, a Math with a new Order of Karma Yogis attached to the temple, "a nucleus of men in whom the Shakti is developed to the uttermost extent, in whom it fills every corner of the personality and overflows to fertilise the earth"; and thirdly, the nectar-rean message of *so-aham*, "the mighty formula of the Vedanta... the knowledge which, when vivified by Karma and Bhakti, delivers man out of all fear and all weakness". Then comes the fitting peroration:

• Come then, hearken to the call of the Mother. She is already in our hearts waiting to manifest Herself, waiting to be worshipped, — inactive because the God in us is concealed by tamas, troubled by Her inactivity, sorrowful because Her children will not call on Her to help them. You who feel Her stirring within you, fling off the black veil of self, break down the imprisoning walls of indolence, help Her each as you feel impelled, with your bodies or with your intellect or with your speech or with your wealth or with your prayers and worship each man according to his capacity. Draw not back, for against those who were called and heard Her not She may well be wroth in the day of Her coming; but to those who help Her advent even a little, how radiant with beauty and kindness will be the face of their Mother's.

There is an Appendix too, spelling out in some detail the Rules of the new Order of Sannyasins and indica-

ting the nature and scope of their activity under four heads: Work for the People; Work for the Middle Classes; Work for the Wealthy Classes; and General Work for the Country. The Brahmacharins are to vow themselves to Bhavani Bharati's service for at least four years, they are to observe the prescribed discipline and rules of Achar and purity, bodily and mental, and they are to practise strength and self-effacement without seeking for distinction or mere personal fame. Work for the people will be in the direction of "mass instruction and help to the poor and ignorant"—lectures and demonstrations, night schools, religious teaching, nursing the sick and works of charity. Works for the middle classes will include "various works of public utility". Work with the wealthy classes will be of the nature of converting them to a sense of trusteeship and of forging the links of common humanity between all classes. When funds are available, some of the members of the Order may be sent abroad to study "lucrative arts and manufactures" so that, on their return, they may establish factories and workshops in India; and some may also be sent out as missionaries to prepare for a global acceptance of Aryan ideals. The Appendix is decidedly (and perhaps understandably) on a lower key than the main text of Bhavani Mandir, and probably it was really Barin's work.

Reading this extraordinary document today—from the bold opening statement, the splendid exordium, the piled up mass of passion and prophecy and imagination and argument, and careering through to the magnificent peroration—we are at once struck by its perfervid eloquence and weight of thought, its tone of high idealism, its terrifying integrity and earnestness;

and what is, perhaps, even more surprising is its continuing relevance sixty-five years after its composition, its burning contemporaneity. Most of it might have been written for *us*, with a few omissions and additions — and some heavy underlinings as well. For *Bhavani Mandir* is in itself a reservoir of *Shakti* and is fed by the perennial springs of the Spirit.

That *Bhavani Mandir* set youthful hearts aglow with adoration of the Mother, that it turned many of them to the path of heroic exertion and unstinted sacrifice, is by no means difficult to understand. But why did it act — as act it did — as a red rag to the *mahisa*-like alien bureaucracy and its staunch local allies? Overtly there is hardly a mention of politics. Even the Rules and programme of work seem on the whole quite innocuous, unless of course one tried ingeniously to read between the lines for sinister hidden meanings and dangerous directives.

And yet, — how rattled, how intrigued, how scandalised were the pillars of the bureaucracy! How they nearly lost their balance, their sense of measure, their very common sense almost! Mr. Denham, the Superintendent of Police, Special Branch, Calcutta, thought it fit to observe:

Bhavani Mandir was nothing but a gigantic scheme for establishing a central religious Society, outwardly religious, but in spirit, energy and work political. From this centre, missionaries well-versed in religious-political argument were to go on their wanderings over India, to form fresh centres and gain fresh recruits. The argument in the pamphlet is ingenious and when examined shows that extraordinary adroitness with which its author has misin-

terpreted the Vedantist ideas for his own purposes, and to adorn his talk and point his moral...³⁷ With a kind of hind-sight, the Government of the day tried to read *Bhavani Mandir* in the light of some later happenings and developments, for example the articles in *Jugantar* preaching open revolt and giving instructions on guerilla warfare, and the shading off of nationalism towards terrorism. In the words of Haridas and Uma Mukherjee:

But even within the left camp further extremism developed by 1906 (the year after the composition of *Bhavani Mandir*) and it was taking the shape of terrorism. Of this new school in Bengal, Aurobindo was in a sense the spiritual father whose influence on Bhupendra Nath Datta (Vivekananda's brother) and Barindra Kumar Ghose was considerable. Bhupendra Nath and Barindra Kumar were upholders of the cult of triumph through terror.³⁸ Many years later, the Rowlatt Committee's Report (1917) also pointed out, as if taking its cue from Mr. Denham, that *Bhavani Mandir* "really contains the germs of the Hindu revolutionary movement in Bengal", and further indicted the book as "a remarkable instance of the perversion of religious ideals for political purposes".³⁹ On the other hand, the Marquess of Zetland writing long afterwards sees in the pamphlet "the idea which was to form the core of the philosophy which he (Sri Aurobindo) was to formulate later on... (stressing) the need for a reinterpretation of spiritual experience to relate it to the

³⁷ Quoted in Haridas & Uma Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics* (1964), pp xxv-xxvi.

³⁸ *The Origins of the National Education Movement* (1957), p. 74.

³⁹ Quoted in *Loving Homage* (1958), p. 278.

changing conditions evolved in the outward progress of mankind".⁴⁰

As a matter of fact, neither the Mandir nor the Math actually came into existence; "the idea of the Mandir", said Sri Aurobindo later, "simply lapsed of itself".⁴¹ Why then did the mere pamphlet — a few hundred copies, perhaps, in circulation — generate so much fright in official circles, and inspire so much hope among the young revolutionaries? The reason was that the idea behind *Bhavani Mandir* was something akin to "nuclear" action. It aimed at releasing infinite energy in every Indian and fusing these three hundred million such infinities into one gigantic, one irresistible, one illimitably stupendous dynamo of Bharat Shakti. It was but an idea as yet, a visionary possibility, but even so its utter mathematical simplicity and its terrifying cumulative grandeur inspired, astonished and frightened all at once. Besides, there was the idea that India was to be the Guru of the world: not a subject nation, not an appendage of Britain, but a nation awakened, a puissant nation on the march, a nation leading other nations, not by recourse to war, but by giving a new religion to the world — the true religion of humanity reared on spiritual foundations. All this came as a boost to the revolutionaries, and as a warning to the Ruling Race. No mere analysis or comment, however, can really measure the impact of *Bhavani Mandir* on the generation that passed from adolescence to early manhood during 1905-6 and the years immediately following. Sri Aurobindo had succeeded in conveying much though saying little,

⁴⁰ Foreword to G H Langley's *Sri Aurobindo Poet, Philosopher and Mystic* (1949)

⁴¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 86.

he had made *Bhavani Mandir* both the Virgin and the Dynamo, both a Manifesto for Change and Transformation and an ultimatum to the colonial power. Like all great political literature (like Milton's *Areopagitica*, for example), *Bhavani Mandir* too was both admirably pointed to the occasion and yet was seraphically free from the taint of the merely local or temporal.

CHAPTER NINE

HOUR OF GOD

I

Sri Aurobindo's decisive plunge into the maelstrom of Indian politics and his tempestuous involvement in it occupied a mere fraction of his life—a matter of three or four years. But they were to prove momentous years in India's history. A convenient breakdown would be—*July 1905-July 1906*: The “partition of Bengal”, the “Hour of God” that roused and united the people of Bengal and of India as a whole against their unwanted British rulers. This year was the transitional period of Sri Aurobindo's silent withdrawal from Baroda and of the beginnings of his open participation in Bengal and national politics.

August 1906-August 1907: Sri Aurobindo in Calcutta as Principal of the newly started National College and as de facto editor of the *Bande Mataram*. The year climaxed in the first prosecution against Sri Aurobindo as the supposed editor of the paper, ending in his acquittal for want of proof that he was indeed the editor.

September 1907-April 1908: The first prosecution had pushed Sri Aurobindo from comparative obscurity to national eminence. He was now recognised as one of the four outstanding leaders of the “extremist” or Nationalist party, the other three being Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Bepin Chandra Pal. The split at the Surat Congress (December 1907) was followed by Sri Aurobindo's first Yogic realisation at Baroda, and

his "Midlothian" campaign from Bombay to Calcutta. His articles in the *Bande Mataram* and his public speeches made him the pace-maker and tone-setter of the movement for India's freedom.

May 1908-May 1909: Sri Aurobindo's arrest in connection with the Muzzaferpore outrage and the Manicktolla bomb factory, his imprisonment in the Alipur jail, the second great Yogic realisation, the prolonged trial, and the honourable acquittal.

May 1909-February 1910: Sri Aurobindo emerged from prison a changed man with an accession of spiritual strength and a new serenity, edited the *Karmayogin* and the *Dharma*, and in response to an *ādes*h, an inner command, left for Chandernagore in February 1910.

During the first year (1905-6), Sri Aurobindo was hardly known outside the small circle of his students at Baroda, and his friends and immediate associates in Baroda and elsewhere, but he was already a recognised power behind the scenes of political jostlings and joustings. During the second year (1906-7), he was more widely known (though mainly in Bengal), as professor and as editor and as spokesman of the nationalist party; it was the first prosecution that overnight made him an all-India figure. During the third year (1907-8) — it was really eight months — he took an active part organising nationalist opinion and forcing the split at Surat, while his first Yogic realisation of Nirvana at Baroda gave a new turn to the quality and intensity of the whole tenor of his future life. During the fourth period (1908-9), Sri Aurobindo was in jail at Alipur, and while India was anxiously following the tortuous course of his trial, *he* had his marvellous *sāadhanā* in prison, *saw* God and

experienced Him every moment, and came out at last, not only without any legal stain on his character, but also as a new man altogether, poised and purposeful and radiant, verily a man of God. The last phase of his political career, a period of eight or nine months, was the time when his actions and utterances had the impress of spirituality and when he thought and wrote and spoke and acted as one whose real political work was fast concluding — as one who was preparing for a long and unpredictable journey into realms hitherto uncharted and even unsuspected.

II

Let us now cover the ground of these three or four years a little more leisurely and with some greater attention to detail. First, then, about the "partition", and its author, Lord Curzon.

After a brilliant career at Eton and Oxford, Curzon had already made his mark in law, letters and politics — and travelled extensively in Central Asia — before he was appointed at the age of forty as Governor-General and Viceroy of India in 1899. His mind was set on the ultimate prize, the Prime Ministership of Great Britain, and of course he had no doubt that he had the requisite talents. He felt that, in the meantime, his talents should be put to vigorous use, not allowed to rust unburnished through ignominious desuetude. He had a mind of his own, and he took very seriously indeed his stewardship of the Indian subcontinent. He wouldn't, he decided, leave all initiative and decision to his officials; he would rule as well as reign. He brought the new administrative

unit of North-West Frontier Province into existence, the better to contain discontent and disorder; even so there was renewed trouble, but it was firmly put down. To check Russian influence in Tibet, he sent an expeditionary force under Sir Francis Younghusband who imposed the Treaty of Lhasa in 1904, which was acquiesced in by China two years later, both India and China agreeing to respect the sovereignty of Tibet. Curzon also tried to effect improvement in every branch of the administration, regardless of public opinion or official opposition. He reduced the salt tax twice and made the lower incomes free of tax, and generally brought a measure of economy and efficiency into financial administration. He settled the question of Berar with the Nizam, did much to preserve ancient monuments, and gave some thought to the problem of education. He was a man very liberally endowed by nature, he had an earnest and ardent temperament, and he didn't spare himself. But he was a little too sure of the infallibility of his own conclusions, he couldn't see that Britain's rule in India even at its best was an abnormal thing bound to be resented by India, and he was therefore intolerant of criticism however reasonably couched, and he didn't hesitate to make contemptuous references to Indian leaders and even to the Indian character. He wished to crush the spirit of nationalism, and he was surprised that the only result of his actions was to inject a new vigour into the movement. Curzon became more and more an embittered man.

In Curzon's time, the seat of the Government of India was at Calcutta, and Bengal was under a Lieutenant-Governor — not, like the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, under a Governor. Bengal had always been in the vanguard of the Indian renaissance, and some of the

finest, some of the most fearless, some of the most intrepid minds of the time — patriots, poets, lawyers, editors, educationists — were then concentrated at Calcutta. Curzon could do nothing, say nothing, but it was noticed and commented upon, and criticised when necessary. For an Englishman, Curzon alas! had little sense of humour, and he was thus quick to take offence and feel his august majesty wounded. He concluded that the free spirit of criticism, the dangerous sanctions of nationalism, the newly sharpened weapons of public association, debate and agitation must all be contained even if they couldn't be wholly suppressed. Didn't the Government — and *he* was the Government — know what was good for the people? How then did the "leaders" of the Congress — or why should they — come into the picture?

The old administrative divisions were no doubt haphazard contrivances, the result largely of accretions from successive campaigns of aggression and annexation; and the sprawling 'presidencies' were justifiable neither in terms of geography nor the imperatives of economics. They had grown, or rather fanned out, from the island of Bombay, the Fort St. George in Madras and Fort St. William in Calcutta. In the nineteenth century, the 'Bengal' administration had included present-day West Bengal and East Bengal (Bangla Desh), and Bihar (including Chota Nagpur), Assam and Orissa. Even when Assam was formed (along with some Bengali border areas like Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara) as a separate province, residuary Bengal — with its population of nearly 80 millions looking up to Calcutta for leadership in politics, education, commerce, industry and administration — remained the principal constituent of the British Empire in India. Here was Curzon's chance to do some-

thing spectacular! In 1903, H. H. Risley of the Government of India — obviously on Curzon's initiative — put forward to the Government of Bengal a proposal to detach several districts from East and North Bengal, and with their addition to Assam to constitute the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. This was not motivated — like the later formation of Sind and Orissa, or the post-Independence linguistic reorganisation — by the desire to forge linguistic unity in individual administrative units. The ostensible plea was administrative convenience or viability. But it was clear to almost everybody that the move had a more sinister purpose as well. It was given out that such a redistribution would help the Muslim population — heavily concentrated in the districts to be separated from Bengal — to get a fairer deal than under the unwieldy administration centered in Calcutta. This sudden solicitude for the Muslims was rather suspicious, and it seemed more likely that the aim of the proposed partition was really to strike a blow at the heart of Bengali nationalism by dividing the nation itself into two. At any rate that was how it appeared at the time — and not without reason either — to the people of both West and East Bengal. Curzon himself hastened to make a tour of East Bengal and tried to win the Muslims over to the partition idea by putting it out that, in the new province, they would be a powerful community and thus come to their own at last. This aspect of the matter was later to be underlined by the egregious Sir Bamfylde Fuller, a senior civilian appointed to the lieutenant-governorship of the new province, who deliberately adopted a pro-Muslim (or anti-Hindu) attitude by referring to the two communities as his two wives, the Muslim being the favourite one!

Both Curzon and Fuller were to come to grief not long after, and resign their posts and retreat to England, and the partition itself was to be annulled in due course. And yet the Curzon-Risley-Fuller combination did succeed in sowing the seed that—like the proverbial Dragon's teeth—was ultimately to achieve, forty years later, a greater evil than what even they had intended or hoped for: the ill-fated, tragic and ever to be mourned partition of the country itself into India and Pakistan.

Criticism of the proposed partition of Bengal was not slow in expressing itself. It is said that the people of the affected areas organised some 500 protest meetings during December 1903 and January 1904 alone,¹ and the 'tidal waves of this agitation were presently to overwhelm all Bengal, and the effects were to be felt in almost every part of the country. As Sir Henry Cotton, who had retired after serving the Bengal Government under seven Lieutenant-Governors, wrote in the *Manchester Guardian* of 5 April 1904:

The idea of the severance of the oldest and most populous and wealthy portion of Bengal and the division of its people into two arbitrary sections has given such a shock to the Bengali race, and has roused such a feeling amongst them, as was never known before. The idea of being severed from their own brethren, friends and relations... is so intolerable to the people of the affected tracts that public meetings have been held in almost every town and market-place in East Bengal, and the separation scheme has been universally and unanimously condemned.²

¹ Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *India's Fight for Freedom*, p. 17.

² Quoted in *Bulletin*, February 1963, p. 82

Again, as President of the Bombay session (December 1904) of the Indian National Congress, Sir Henry castigated the British administration in India and described their ignorance of the mounting opposition to the proposed partition as "a most arbitrary and unsympathetic evidence of irresponsible and autocratic statesmanship".

When Curzon saw that the idea of partition was most reprehensible to the people immediately concerned and the voice of protest was raised vehemently against the scheme—that the matter was even raised in Parliament by a member, Herbert Roberts—he lay low for a while, then suddenly, having in the meantime secured the consent of the Secretary of State, he had the Partition Act passed by the Legislative Council on 20 July 1905 at Simla with only the official members present, and issued the Gazette Notification on 29 September, the operation to become an accomplished fact on 16 October 1905. Curzon had been given a second term as Viceroy in 1904, but acute differences developed between him and Lord Kitchener the Commander-in-Chief, and on the Secretary of State upholding Kitchener's point of view, Curzon resigned in a huff and was promptly succeeded by Lord Minto—but the partition had already been effected. Curzon had sowed the wind, but Minto had to reap the consequent whirlwind.

The day partition became an "accomplished fact" was observed as a day of mourning in both the sundered parts of Bengal. As vividly described by Henry Nevinson in his *The New Spirit in India*:

On that day... thousands and thousands of Indians rub dust or ashes on their foreheads; at dawn they bathe in silence as at a sacred fast; no meals are eaten; the shops in cities and the village bazars are

shut; women refuse to cook; they lay aside their ornaments; men bind each other's wrists with a yellow string as a sign that they will never forget the shame; and the whole day is passed in resentment, mourning, and the hunger of humiliation. In Calcutta vast meetings are held, and the errors of the Indian Government are exposed with eloquent patriotism.

Other British observers and commentators have since testified how the act of partition, far from stemming the tide of nationalism (as Curzon had hoped it would achieve), merely proved the fuse that set ablaze the nation-wide conflagration of anti-British agitation. "I am bound to say", admitted John Morley the new Secretary of State in the House of Commons, "nothing was ever worse done in disregard to the feeling and opinion of the majority of the people concerned". Curzon's biographer, Lord Ronaldshay, later described the act of partition as "a subtle attack upon the growing solidarity of Bengali nationalism", and Ramsey MacDonald the future Prime Minister went further still and characterised the measure, in his book *The Awakening in India* (1910), as more than a blunder, for "it was an indictable offence. Lord Curzon's personal feelings entered into it in a most reprehensible way. He devised it, as the evidence shows most conclusively, to pay off scores".³

Furthermore, both within and outside Bengal, even so-called "moderate" opinion felt scandalised and gave bold utterance to the sense of shock and resentment. As

³ The extent of the new province was 106,500 square miles, with a population made up of 10 million Muslims and 12 million Hindus. It is, perhaps, arguable *today* that the earlier partition, had it been accepted, *might* have prevented the more disastrous partition of 1947!

Surendranath Banerjee put it years later:

We felt that we had been insulted, humiliated and tricked. We felt that the whole of our future was at stake, and that it was a deliberate blow aimed at the growing solidarity and self-consciousness of the Bengali-speaking population.... The Partition would be fatal to our political progress and to that close union between Hindus and Muhammadans upon which the prospects of Indian advancement so largely depended.⁴

Sir Henry Cotton's words of caution at the Bombay Congress (1904) having gone unheeded, it was inevitable that the next Congress at Benares (1905), following close upon the "settled fact", should take a somewhat more aggressive line. Minto had just displaced Curzon, and there was guarded expectation of a reversal of the old policy. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the Prince of the Moderates, was in the presidential chair, and he could hardly avoid making a reference to Curzon and the evil legacy he had left behind:

...how true it is that to everything there is an end! Thus even the Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon has come to a close!... For a parallel to such an administration, we must, I think, go back to the times of Aurangzeb in the history of our own country....

A cruel wrong has been inflicted on our Bengali brethren.... The scheme of Partition, concocted in the dark and carried out in the face of the fiercest opposition that any Government measure has encoun-

⁴ *A Nation in the Making*, pp. 187-8.

tered during the last half a century, will always stand as a complete illustration of the worst features of the present system of bureaucratic rule... it is difficult to speak in terms of due restraint of Lord Curzon's conduct throughout this affair.

But Gokhale also found a "soul of goodness" in the evil of partition, and read a message of bright hope for the future:

The tremendous upheaval of popular feeling... will constitute a landmark in the history of our national progress. For the first time since British rule began, all sections of the Indian community, without distinction of caste or creed, have been moved, by a common impulse and without the stimulus of external pressure, to act together in offering resistance to a common wrong.

When it came to constructive proposals, however, Gokhale could hardly go the whole hog with the nationalists. Swadeshi was all right, of course, but "boycott", and of British goods alone? The very word had "unsavoury associations" for Gokhale! As for the national goal, like Cotton who had pleaded in the previous year for a "United States of India" within the British Empire, Gokhale too thought that whatever "advance" India sought "must be within the Empire itself", and such advance could only be "gradual". No wonder Tilak pulled Sri Aurobindo out of the pandal and expressed his wholehearted contempt for the Reformists and Gradualists of the Moderate camp.

III

What were Sri Aurobindo's reactions to the Curzonian decision to partition Bengal?

We have seen how, quite ten years earlier in 1893, Sri Aurobindo had exposed in his *Indu Prakash* articles, albeit anonymously, the shallowness, weakness and puerility of the politics of the Indian National Congress, — the politics of pettifoggery, prayer-mongering and perpetual petitioning. That had proved pretty strong meat at the time, and Sri Aurobindo had accordingly withdrawn into his shell, cultivated poetry, and probed other possibilities. From 1899 onwards, he had begun the secret work of organising revolution in Bengal which was duly to take all India in its stride. For Sri Aurobindo the issue always was Indian independence, the recovery of India's soul, and the galvanisation of the prostrate body of Mother India. He had himself become a member of the Revolutionary Party with its base in Western India, and he had given the oath to others (including his brother Barin), he had enlisted some high Government officials (like C. C. Dutt) to the cause, he had toured Bengal secretly, he had watched with some satisfaction the stretching out of the tentacles of the revolutionary movement to the remotest villages of Bengal, and he had even tried through Yoga to perfect the instrument that was one day to be wholly consecrated to the service of the Mother. In the meantime, he was a Professor of literature at the Baroda College, and he was watching the shifting political scene and he was waiting for the divinely ordained moment when his open intervention would become imperative. He was like a tiger poised in readiness to leap upon its prey among the ominous

silences of the forest at night, but the prey had yet to assume a recognisable form and spring into view.

To all outward appearances, Sri Aurobindo's life in Baroda pursued its even course. Nevertheless, some of the images of his home life at Baroda, etched from memory years later by his Bengali companion Dinendra Kumar Roy in *Aurobindo Prasange*, are themselves significant and bespeak a power containing itself with effort, a power waiting, watching — with more than human concentration and more than the gods' casual commitment to the service of man:

Though an inflexible will showed at the corners of his lips, there was not the slightest trace in his heart of any worldly ambition or the common human selfishness; there was only the longing, rare even among the gods, of sacrificing himself for the relief of human suffering....

For one hour every evening, he would pace up and down the verandah of his house with brisk steps... He was fond of music, but did not know how to sing or play on any musical instrument.⁵

When the notorious Risley Letter first forced upon the attention of the public Curzon's unscrupulous move to divide the Bengali nation, Sri Aurobindo welcomed it because this calculated affront at least would knock the people out of their lethargy and sting them into resolute action. For Sri Aurobindo (as it was to his secret revolutionary party), the issue then as always was, not just the prevention or annulment of the hated partition, but rather the creation of a tempo of resistance in

⁵ Quoted in *Sri Aurobindo—His Life and Work* as it appeared serially in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* (XIII, 2), pp. 152, 156.

the country that would make British rule impossible — that would force the British to make a virtue of necessity and withdraw from India, may be without a sanguinary fight, or more probably after a brief spell of guerilla warfare Henry Nevinston has left a record of his impressions of Sri Aurobindo at the time:

...a youngish man, I should think still under thirty. Intent dark eyes looked from his thin, clear-cut face with a gravity that seemed immovable.... Grave with intensity, careless of fate or opinion, and one of the most silent men I have known, he was of the stuff that dreamers are made of, but dreamers who will act their dreams, indifferent to the means. What did Sri Aurobindo think of the partition? Sri Aurobindo welcomed it! It had brought a breath of *rajasic* fresh air into the old *tamasic* atmosphere. Hence Sri Aurobindo thought of the scheme, however diabolical in its motivation, "as the greatest blessing that had happened to India. No other measure could have stirred national feeling so deeply or roused it so suddenly from the lethargy of the previous years.... Indignation had again created patriotism when apparently it was dead".⁶

Again, when Sri Aurobindo was with Jatin Banerjee, Barindra and Abinash Bhattacharya, and the news was conveyed to him that the Partition Act was being passed by the Legislative Council, Sri Aurobindo merely said: "This is a very fine opportunity. Carry on the anti-partition agitation powerfully. We will get many workers for the movement".⁷ The partition was but one move in a long war, and the anti-partition movement was to be a means of mobilising public opinion on the more fundamental issue of Swaraj or complete national inde-

⁶ *The New Spirit in India*, p. 222. ⁷ Purani, *Life*, p. 77.

pendence unshackled by notions of gradualism or colonial self-government. Sri Aurobindo attended, as we saw earlier, both the Bombay and Benares sessions of the Congress, and his pamphlet *No Compromise*, amateurishly set up and secretly printed at dead of night and distributed before daybreak, was meant to steel the hearts of the nationalists and make them refuse to yield to the sweet and plausible persuasions of the Moderates. Unruffled and self-possessed, utterly dedicated to the service of the Mother, willing to be carried forward by the heavy current of nationalist fervour suddenly released by the Time Spirit, destined to incarnate in his life-movement the energy of impulsion and the sense of direction of awakened Mother India, Sri Aurobindo at this historic moment was "lone, limitless, nude, immune". Silent and purposeful and eagle-eyed and resilient, Sri Aurobindo flitted behind the scenes when occasion demanded—now at the Congress session, now at the Taj Mahal Hotel at Bombay to meet G. D. Madgaokar of the Civil Service and his associates to discuss the prospects of revolution in Gujarat, now lost in the ocean of Calcutta humanity scouring the underground waters of discontent and revolutionary idealism.

During 1905-6, Sri Aurobindo was ostensibly in the service of the Baroda College. From April to September 1905, he acted as Principal on a consolidated salary of Rs. 710 per month. When a public meeting was held in Baroda in September to protest against the Bengal partition, Sri Aurobindo was present there—though he did not make a speech. At Thana he met at his friend C. C. Dutt's his brother-in-law Subodh Mullick, who presently became one of Sri Aurobindo's staunchest friends and closest colleagues in political as well as

revolutionary work. When partition became a fact on 16 October 1905, Sri Aurobindo knew that the "Hour of God" had come indeed, and he was in Calcutta for a considerable time, helping to organise from behind the swadeshi and boycott agitations that were to prove such a phenomenal success in the months and years to come. In his inspired article entitled "The Hour of God" Sri Aurobindo writes:

There are moments when the Spirit moves among men and the breath of the Lord is abroad upon the waters of our being... when even a little effort produces great results and changes destiny....

Unhappy is the man or the nation which, when the divine moment arrives, is found sleeping or unprepared to use it, because the lamp has not been kept trimmed for the welcome and the ears are sealed to the call. But thrice woe to them who are strong and ready, yet waste the force or misuse the moment ...

In the hour of God cleanse thy soul of all self-deceit and hypocrisy and vain self-flattering that thou mayst look straight into thy spirit and hear that which summons it... being pure cast aside all fear; for the hour is often terrible, a fire and a whirlwind and a tempest, a treading of the wine-press of the wrath of God; but he who can stand up in it on the truth of his purpose is he who shall stand; even though he fall, he shall rise again; even though he seem to pass on the wings of the wind, he shall return. Nor let worldly prudence whisper too closely to thy ear; for it is the hour of the unexpected.⁸

⁸ *The Hour of God* (1964 reprint), p. 3.

It is difficult to say when exactly this was written, but it certainly breathes the fierce spirit of *Bhavani Mandir* and is vibrant with the electric fervour and faith generated during 1905-6. The "partition" was truly "a moment in time and of time", yet a moment when (as T. S. Eliot might put it) when "time was made through that moment".

It was a time of unprecedented mass agitation against the ruling colonial power. "Swadeshi" became a clarion call, "boycott" resounded like a salvo. Piles of British textiles went up in flames in market-places, on roads, and street-crossings; in crowded public meetings the "National Proclamation" was passed with acclaim and the "Swadeshi Vow" was administered with something akin to religious "fanaticism". Priests are said to have refused to officiate at marriage ceremonies if either bride or bridegroom wore foreign (especially British) clothes. The picketing of shops dealing with foreign cloth became an exciting — if sometimes an explosive — item of the programme of protest. In short, everything British — even British salt and sugar, British shoes and suits, British chemicals and drugs, even the educational and judicial institutions modelled after the British — became anathema to a people maddened and enraged by what must have appeared as the cruel and wanton insolence behind the "partition" operation. So successful indeed was the agitation in its first flush that for a time the Calcutta warehouses were full of fabrics that couldn't be sold. The *Englishman* of Calcutta soon felt concerned enough to warn the Government against acquiescing in the "boycott" programme, for it must "more surely ruin the British connection with India than an armed revolution". The students in schools and colleges, of course, were bound

to be drawn quickly into the vortex, and they were prompt to take a leading part in the campaigns of boycott and picketing and defying Government's prohibitive orders. This naturally led to more repression, which again only bred still more defiance, and so the spiral of repression-defiance-repression curved higher and higher, and the whole air came to be charged increasingly and menacingly with the revolutionary temper.

Recapitulating these events two years later, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

The unpremeditated and spontaneous declaration of the Boycott was the declaration of the country's recovery to life from its death-swoon of centuries, of her determination to live her own life — not for a master, but for herself and the world. All was changed Patriotism, the half-understood catchword of platform oratory, passed out of its confinement into the heart of the people — the priest, the prince and the peasant alike — giving to each that power of sacrifice ... And the demonstration of the Sixteenth of October joined in by the Hindu and the Muhammadan, the Buddhist, the Jain and the Sikh, the police and the people, through the mystic compulsion of an instinctive fraternity, was the enchanting prevision of the India to be. Such a vision is vouchsafed only to the man or the nation that stands on the threshold of emancipation.... It remains but a moment, but those who have seen it can never forget or rest; they pursue the glory... till the vision is reached, realised and reinstalled in all the beauty of its first appearance.⁹

* The *Bande Mataram*, 15 July 1907 (reprinted in Haridas and Uma

In the "Hour of God", compact of challenge, peril, promise and fulfilment, the Vision of a New World sustained the nameless numberless votaries who had dared everything, sacrificed everything. God had led them, God had (it seemed to many) taken a human form to vivify in his own life, in the flaming brazier that was his personality, in the sharp arrow-head of his unquailing leadership, the glow and the shape of the destiny unfolding, and the direction and the pace of the preordained change from the dying old to the dawning new. "There is a Divinity that has been shaping her ends", Sri Aurobindo's article concludes, "for nothing but the renovating touch of Divinity can account for the difference between now and then, between the days before and after the Boycott".

There were leaders enough thrown up by the times, men of patriotism, idealism, and genius for suffering and sacrifice, men with the birth-mark of the fatality of martyrdom, men capable of swaying the multitudes and making them willingly canter to a possible holocaust at the altar of the Motherland — yet, even in that galaxy, Sri Aurobindo was a star apart, a born chief, a being who both summed up the ardours, agonies and aspirations of the time and also somehow stood above them, the Executant and the Witness Spirit at once. As Sri Aurobindo wrote in an article on "Historical Impressions":¹⁰

There are times when a single personality gathers up the temperament of an epoch or a movement and by simply existing ensures its fulfilment....

Mukherji's *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics*, 1964, pp. III-2).

¹⁰ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* (1949).

Without the man the moment is a lost opportunity; without the moment the man is a force inoperative. The meeting of the two changes the destinies of nations .. Every great flood of action needs a human soul for its centre, an embodied point of the Universal Personality from which to surge out upon others.

It hardly mattered that Sri Aurobindo had a name, a job, a salary, a distinctive personality, certain human affiliations — a brother, a sister, a wife — and an adhesion to a political group (the Nationalists) outside and to the secret Revolutionary Party. These labels and these terms of reference were there no doubt, but already — even in 1905 — he was emancipated from the cribbing and cabinning confusions of egoistic perversion and separativity. He could recognise the “Hour of God” when it stridently rang itself into the ambiguous present, and he also incarnated in himself the will and the way of God during those months of singular happenings sixty-five years ago. From behind a veil of night he seemed still to cheer his men.

A little more and the new life's doors
 Shall be carved in silver light
 With its aureate roof and mosaic floors
 In a great world bare and bright.¹¹

IV

It was mentioned in an earlier chapter (III. vii) that, following his marriage to Mrinalini Bose in 1901, Sri Aurobindo went with her and his sister, Sarojini, to Naini

¹¹ *Poems Past and Present* (1952 edition), p. 10

Tal; and after their return to Baroda, Barin also joined them some time later. The next few years were the period of Sri Aurobindo's increasing association with secret revolutionary activity, practice of Yoga and steady withdrawal from the impulsions and imperatives of the average human mentality grounded in intractable egoism. This was not the kind of life that a beautiful young girl still in her teens and brought up in the sophistication of a Brahmo School would have expected. He had to be separated from her frequently, and at times for fairly long periods, and the range and altitude of his interests and preoccupations were unfortunately inaccessible to the simple girl full of tender human qualities who had come to share the life of her husband. Sarojini of course was an understanding and helpful companion and a source of considerable solace. But the fact that Sri Aurobindo was far off and far above her, that the distance was but increasing with the years, must have caused acute discomfort to Mrinalini; and doubtless there were not wanting persons who specialised in dropping hints to her, and putting pressure upon her, and trying to force the issue between her and her husband. The year 1905 was crucial in many respects, and not least in respect of the relations between Sri Aurobindo and his wife.

The question is sometimes posed why Sri Aurobindo married at all, if he had no intention of leading what passes for "normal" family life. There have been others too, for example Gautama Siddharta and Confucius and Ramakrishna Paramahansa. If there was to be a "change" soon afterwards, why did they marry at all in the first instance? Answering the correspondent who ventured to put this question, Sri Aurobindo wrote disarmingly:

Perfectly natural — they marry before the change, then the change comes and the marriage belongs to the past self, not to the new one.... Do you think that Buddha or Confucius or myself were born with a prevision that they or I would take to the spiritual life? So long as one is in the ordinary consciousness, one lives the ordinary life. When the awakening and the new consciousness come, one leaves it.¹²

This was in 1936, nearly eighteen years after Mrinalini's death. But in 1905, when she was at Calcutta and Sri Aurobindo was at Baroda, letters passed between them, and the world would have probably known nothing about them; but some of his letters, written originally in Bengali, were seized by the police during the house-searches in 1908 and produced later in court at the time of the trial in the Alipur case. One of these letters, dated 30 August 1905, is of unique importance in the life-history of Sri Aurobindo and it also throws some needed light on his relationship with his wife during this critical period.

"Dearest Mrinalini" the letter begins, and is apparently a reply to one from her dated 24th August. Her parents have suffered a bereavement (the death of a son), and they are sorrow-stricken. Sri Aurobindo can offer no palliative (who can?), for sorrow is, *dukkha* is the way of the world:

Seeking happiness in the world inevitably leads one to find suffering in the midst of that happiness, for suffering is always intertwined with happiness. This law holds good not only in regard to the de-

¹² Nirodbaran, *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series (1959), pp. 84-5.

sire for children, but it embraces all sorts of worldly desires.¹³

There is then some reference to a remittance of money for her expenses; he will send her Rs. 20 next month.

We are soon launched upon the mainstream of this truly amazing letter. "Now, let me tell you about that matter". What "matter"? Evidently, in her letter of 24th August, she had remonstrated about his unconventional way of life. Without any beating about the bush, he proceeds to write with complete candour about himself. She must have realised by then that her destiny was linked with that of a "very strange person" — an uncommon person with "extraordinary ideas, uncommon efforts, extraordinary high aspirations". What do "ordinary" people think of these "extraordinary" things? Can they possibly understand what is truly beyond them:

They label all these as madness, but if the mad man succeeds in the field of action, then instead of calling him a lunatic, they call him a great man, a man of genius. But how many succeed in their efforts? Out of a thousand persons only ten are extraordinary, and out of these ten one succeeds.

Then Sri Aurobindo states as a self-evident fact that "it is very unfortunate for a woman to be married to a mad man; for all the hopes of women are limited to the joys and the agonies in the family. A mad man would not bring happiness to his wife — he would only inflict suffering". This is the stalemate in the relationship between Sri Aurobindo and Mrinalini. His pull to-

¹³ From the English translation of the letter published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* (1967), pp. 117-21. "Letters to Mrinalini" are also included in Purani's *Life* (II Edition), pp. 97ff, and Keshavmurti's *Sri Aurobindo — The Hope of Man*, pp. 88ff

wards the higher life, her attraction to normal family life: how is the stalemate to be resolved? What has Hindu Dharma to say about it?

The uncommon, the exceptional, the unique had to be fostered; they were the salt of the earth. But the unpredictable genius put a great strain upon his wife. Not for her the primrose path, not for her the joys and agonies of family life! The Rishis, however, have given this code of conduct to the wife:

Know that, for you, the husband is the supreme Guru; this and nothing else is the only *mantra*. The wife is the husband's co-partner in the practice of Dharma. She will help him, advise him and encourage him in the work he chooses for his Dharma; she will obey him as God, feel happy in his happiness and suffer in his suffering.

The new "so-called cultured Dharma" is supposed to give woman the right to go her own way, if necessary in opposition to her husband's; but Hindu Dharma has a different notion of the wife's duties. "That you have married a lunatic", says Sri Aurobindo, "is a fruit of faulty actions of your previous life". She has to come to terms with this situation, either by "blindly" following *his* way of life—or, "swayed by the opinions of others", dismissing him as a mad man! He cannot be held back, for he needs must rush headlong in the direction his daemon shows him. What will she do, then? Stand aside to weep and wail,—or "join him in his run and try to become the mad wife to match the mad husband", as Gandhari blinded herself with a piece of cloth around her eyes to be able to live with blind Dhritarashtra? "Mad" he may be in the world's eyes; but when a mad person achieves the thing his mind is

set on, the same world will acclaim him as a "great" man. It is true Sri Aurobindo has not yet reached his goal, he has not even seriously and regularly thrown himself into his chosen work. But perhaps the day is not far off when the guerdon would be his — and shouldn't his wife stand by his side now, truly a *sahadharmani*, verily her husband's *shakti*?

Sri Aurobindo proceeds to inform his wife that he is in the grip of three mighty convictions — mad ideas, the world will call them! — three obsessions, three manias, three madresses, three supreme frenzies! Firstly, it is Sri Aurobindo's firm belief that all his possessions — "all the virtue, talent, the higher education and knowledge and the wealth God has given me" — are his only on trust, they really belong to God. Out of his earnings he could keep for himself no more than the barest minimum, the rest must be spent on *dharmakarya*. "If I spend all on myself, for personal comfort, for luxury, then I am a thief". So far he has returned only two annas in the rupee, or one-eighth of his income, to God — how imperfect the account he has rendered to Him! It is easy enough to give money to one's wife or one's sister, but "in these hard days, the whole country is seeking refuge at my door"; he must accordingly look upon all the thirty crores of Indians as his brothers and sisters. To live for oneself alone is not wise; and "half of the life has already been wasted; even an animal feels gratified in feeding itself and its family". It is Sri Aurobindo's duty — it is the condition under which wealth and talent have flowed from God to him — to do all that lies in his power to relieve the abysmal misery of the people of his country. Let us eat and dress like simple people, he tells her, "and buy what is really essential, and give

the rest to the Divine”.

Secondly, Sri Aurobindo desires with his whole heart to *see* God — see Him face to face, *experience* Him — however difficult the journey, and however long the way. Popular religion has made God a formula, prayer a routine, godliness a show. Sri Aurobindo has no use for this kind of religion. But if God exists — and He does! — there *must* be a means of confronting Him *tête-à-tête*, experiencing Him; the Hindu scriptures say that God too can be seen and experienced, and prescribe certain disciplines for the attainment of that end. “I have begun to observe them”, says Sri Aurobindo, “and within a month I have been able to ascertain that the words of the Hindu Dharma are not untrue”. Will not she his wife, will she not also keep abreast of him — at least follow him if she cannot come alongside of him — on his Godward journey? But nobody can force her to the path; it will be for her alone to decide what she will do.

Thirdly, there is the madness of his relationship with the country of his birth, Mother India:

...whereas others regard the country as an inert piece of matter and know it as the plains, the fields, the forests, the mountains and the rivers, I know my country as the Mother, I worship her and adore her accordingly. What would a son do when a demon, sitting on his mother's breast, prepared to drink her blood? Would he sit down content to take his meals or go on enjoying himself in the company of his wife and children, or would he rather run to the rescue of his mother? I know I have the strength to uplift this fallen race; not a physical strength, I am not going to fight with a sword or a gun, but with the power of knowledge....

He will do it, not by *kshatratej*, but by virtue of his *brahmatej*. It is his *mahavrata*, mighty vow, and he is resolved to carry it out. Nor is this a sudden whim or passing mood:

I was born with it, it is in my very marrow. God sent me to the earth to accomplish this great mission. At the age of fourteen the seed of it had begun to sprout and at eighteen it had been firmly rooted and become unshakable.

Will she not, she his own wife, stand by his side and be a source of encouragement and strength to him? Or will she diminish her husband's power by succumbing to the lure of sophistication? It is no answer to say that, being but a simple woman lacking intelligence and will power, she cannot possibly keep step with him. "There is a simple solution for it—take refuge in the Divine, step on to the path of God-realisation". Giving up all fear, putting her implicit trust in God in a mood of absolute self-surrender, she, even she an apparently weak woman, can dare and achieve much. Together they can then start fulfilling God's aims:

And if you have faith in me, and listen to what I say instead of listening to others, I can give you my force which would not be reduced (by giving) but would, on the contrary, increase. We say that the wife is the *shakti* of the husband, that means that the husband sees his own reflection in the wife, finds the echo of his noble aspiration in her and thereby redoubles his force.

Let her give up the common attractions of a worldly life and follow him; "we have come to the world to do God's work, let us begin it".

Towards the close of the letter, Sri Aurobindo tells

Mrinalini that she is "too simple" — too ready to "listen to all that people say" — and also that she has been infected to some extent by the spirit of the times, by her association with the Brahmo school. But her real nature will blossom if only she will trust in God and seek strength from Him. And she should always offer this prayer to Him: "May I not come in the way of my husband's life, and his ideals, and in his path to God-realisation; may I become his helper and his instrument". And the letter concludes with the appeal: "Will you do it?"

In this remarkable letter, a letter addressed to his wife "dearest Mrinalini", a letter breathing love of the community of thirty crores of Indian humanity, and love of God and love of the country, a letter pleading, earnestly pleading, for his wife's total identification with him in his triune adventure of love for Man, God and Country, in this letter Sri Aurobindo has set the whole emotion of love to an orchestration that includes the divers strains of man and wife, the community, God and country, thereby making love, not the romantic tinsel it is in novels and cinemas, not the war of sexes it is in D. H. Lawrence, not a laborious exercise in egoistic domesticity that it is with most married couples, but an enlargement and emancipation of the self, a communion with bigger realities, a thrilled and ecstatic adoration and service of the community, of God, of country — of God in the community and the country. Here, again, what is perhaps particularly significant in Sri Aurobindo's attitude is the identification of the Mother in the geographical entity spotted with mountains and hills, veined with rivers and streams, and shaded with forests and plains. Sri Aurobindo always saw this spiritual reality of

the Mother behind the physical body of the Indian sub-continent. One of his distinguished pupils, K. M. Munshi, has recorded how Sri Aurobindo once pointed to a wall-map of India and called it Bharat Mata's, Mother India's, portrait. The geography was the body of the Mother: the people were the cells that made the living tissues: the languages and literatures were the Mother's memory and speech: the spirit of the nation's culture was Her living soul: and the nation's freedom and happiness Her only salvation! "Behold Bharat as a living Mother", Sri Aurobindo had said, "meditate upon Her and worship Her in the ninefold way of Bhakti!"¹⁴ Again, in 1933, in reply to Nirodbaran's query whether the expression "mother" applied to India was the utter truth or only a poetic or patriotic sentiment, Sri Aurobindo wrote in reply: "My dear sir, I am not a materialist. If I had seen India as only a geographical area with a number of more or less interesting or uninteresting people in it, I would hardly have gone out of my way to do all that for the said area".

In an article on "Boycott" written not long after his entry into politics, Sri Aurobindo returned to the theme of love in politics and as related to the adoration and worship of the country as the Mother:

Love has a place in politics, but it is the love of one's country, for one's countrymen, for the glory, greatness and happiness of the race, the divine *ananda* of self-immolation for one's fellows, the ecstasy of relieving their sufferings, the joy of seeing one's blood flow for country and freedom, the bliss of union in death with the fathers of the race. The feeling of almost physical delight in the

¹⁴ *Bhavan's Journal*, 22 July 1962.

touch of the mother-soil, of the winds that blow from Indian seas, of the rivers that stream from Indian hills, in the hearing of Indian speech, music, poetry, in the familiar sights, sounds, habits, dress, manners of our Indian life, this is the physical root of that love.¹⁵

Much of the language of sexual love, much of the poetry of romantic love, is reproduced here, but all is transferred to another level: love, and adoration, of the country and sacrifice on her behalf — delight of existence in the country's munificence of beauty and variety, burning laceration because of the maladies and difficulties that have now overtaken her, and the ultimate ecstasy in the orgasmic finality of resurrection-in-death in the holocaust of martyrdom. No wonder Ramsay MacDonald, when he met Sri Aurobindo and heard him expound his philosophy and theology of patriotism, felt quite taken aback and confused but also duly impressed: "He was far more a mystic than a politician. He saw India seated on a temple throne.... The *matripuja* — the worship of the Mother — has become a political rite.... He returns to his Gods and to the faith of his country, for there is no India without its faith...."¹⁶

V

From Sri Aurobindo's letter of 30 August 1905, it is clear he was engaged in *sadhana* at the time and was making progress in it; also that he had not yet entered his "field of action... fully", meaning political and revo-

¹⁵ *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* (1952 edition), p. 83

¹⁶ *The Awakening in India*

lutionary action. He had one foot in Baroda, one in Calcutta, but certainly his mind was with his associates in Bengal. In another of his letters to his wife, there is a reference to Madhavrao (a nephew of Kashirao Jadhav) being sent to Europe presumably to get military training, secure arms and learn about the making of explosives. Some time later, another also — Hemachandra Kanungo — was sent to Europe for the same purpose. What with one thing and another, there were numerous calls upon his resources: "I have spent a lot in the Swadeshi movement and I have another work yet to be done which requires enormous wealth".¹⁷

In December 1905, at the Benares Congress, Sri Aurobindo made his presence felt without, perhaps, actually participating in the open debates. Gokhale the President of the session was not in favour of extending boycott to the whole country, but at least its use as a weapon against the bureaucracy in Bengal was acknowledged. On Swadeshi, however, there was universal agreement; and, besides, the Congress could hardly ignore the new heightened urgency in the discussions, and the mood of anger and exasperation with which the nationalists answered the air of prudence and expostulation on the part of the Moderates. Although it was mainly from the Maharashtra and Punjab contingents of delegates alone that the Bengali ginger-group received positive support, anybody could see that the Congress wouldn't remain the same much longer.

From Benares, Sri Aurobindo returned to Baroda, but a month later, in February 1906, he took privilege leave for two months, to which he attached the summer vacation and spent the whole period in Bengal. He visited the

¹⁷ Purani, *Life*, pp. 108-9.

Agricultural Exhibition at Midnapore in February, and on 14 April, he attended the Barisal Conference which was specially scheduled to discuss the situation in Bengal created by the partition. Although Government promptly banned it, the organisers decided to defy the ban; the procession led by B. C. Pal, Sri Aurobindo and B. C. Chatterji in the first row was sought to be stopped, and on the processionists refusing to disperse, they were lathi-charged by the police and many were injured in consequence. Thus did defiance of the law acquire respectability and sanctity at Barisal, and the abortive conference made history more than it would have, had it been allowed to be held in peace.

After Barisal, Sri Aurobindo and B. C. Pal toured East Bengal, where mammoth meetings were held against the Partition, sometimes even in spite of Government's prohibitory orders. This was taking political education to the people, and it was equally the leaders educating themselves by getting to know at first hand the quickened pulse of the masses. Sri Aurobindo had written in the *Indu Prakash* twelve years earlier that "the proletariat is... the real key of the situation. Torpid he is and immobile... but he is a very great potential force, and whoever succeeds in understanding and eliciting his strength, becomes by the very fact master of the future".¹⁸ It was by means of such tours and other forms of uninhibited mass contact that Sri Aurobindo was able to penetrate the sealed nucleus of the heart of the proletariat, tap the illimitable store of potential energy, and release it for the national cause.

Sri Aurobindo returned to Baroda in June 1906, but presently took leave on loss of pay for a year, and after

¹⁸ 8 March 1894.

a visit to Chandod where he had darshan of Swami Brahmananda, came back to Calcutta in July. For all practical purposes, he was leaving the Baroda service for good. He hardly gave a thought to the settled salary, and the seductive prospects. The Mother had called him to Bengal, — he would go! Was he taking a blind leap into the Unknown? — he did not know, and he did not care, and he did not hesitate either. Here was work for him to do, here was Bhavani Bharati summoning him to action, — nothing else, nothing else mattered.

Before Sri Aurobindo reached Calcutta in July 1906, certain avenues of activity had been — or were being — opened for him. In the first place, he had permitted, on Barindra's suggestion, the starting of a weekly paper in Bengali, *Yugantar*, on 13 March 1906. The paper was to preach "open revolt and absolute denial of the British rule", and Sri Aurobindo himself wrote some of the leading articles in the early issues, and "always exercised a general control".¹⁹ Among the editorial staff were able writers and committed revolutionaries like Barin, Abinash Bhattacharya and Swami Vivekananda's brother, Bhupendranath Datta. From the beginning the paper was a sensational success, the circulation leaping up from one to ten thousand in the course of a year, and sometimes it had to be printed secretly at more than one press. As for the business side, it was hopeless; and "nobody bothered about the income and expenditure, for we were not out for money-making".²⁰ Incidentally, the *Yugantar* office at Kanaidhar Lane in Calcutta also became Barin's base of operations for his secret revolutionary activity.

¹⁹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 44

²⁰ Quoted from Upendranath Bandopadhyaya's *Galpa Bharati* (as cited

An English counterpart for the *Yugantar* was soon felt to be a necessity, and this was provided when Bepin Pal started the daily *Bande Mataram* on 6 August 1906, with barely Rs. 500, donated by Haridas Haldar, in his pocket. Pal wanted Sri Aurobindo to be Joint Editor of the *Bande Mataram*, and this was to give him another line of action—for the word was power, and Sri Aurobindo's words were a form of Sri Aurobindo's action, and they also stung others to action—with truly national ramifications.

Lastly, there was the question of "national education". The need of those times was to undo the mischief caused by the system of education that had been introduced by the British. It had its good points, but it was largely divorced from the currents of local tradition and even the hard realities of our economic situation. The result was that it emasculated Indian youth and made them mimic futilities in their own country. In his *Indu Prakash* articles of 1893-4, Sri Aurobindo had castigated the education of the day and thrown out hints for reform. One of the Bengali pioneers of the new education was Satis Chandra Mukherjee (1865-1948). He founded the *Bhagavat Chatuspati* in 1895, the "Dawn" Magazine in 1897, the Dawn Society in 1902 and the National Council of Education in 1906. The *Chatuspati* aimed at giving a spiritual turn to education, the "Dawn" Magazine (started as the organ of the *Chatuspati*) soon broadened its scope and became one of the formative influences of renascent Bengal. Then came the Dawn Society, its aim being to provide moral and religious instruction and also to "supplement even the ordinary

academic education imparted in the various colleges".²¹ After the partition, the National Council of Education came into existence, and under its auspices the Bengal National College was established in 1906, facilitated by a munificent donation of Rs. one lakh from Raja Subodh Mullick, Sri Aurobindo's friend and close collaborator. Mullick seems to have stipulated that Sri Aurobindo should be appointed a Professor in the College on a salary of Rs. 150, and this was of course done.²² Thus on leaving the Baroda College, Sri Aurobindo had waiting for him the Principalship of the new Bengal National College, with Satis Chandra Mukherjee as its Superintendent. After a stay of almost fourteen years, Sri Aurobindo now shook the dust of Baroda from off his feet, and sprang into action at Calcutta, armed with the assurance of the Rishi to King Manu:

Of this be sure, the mighty game goes on,
The glorious strife,
Until the goal predestined has been won.²³

²¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 50.

²² For a detailed history, the reader is referred to Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *The Origins of the National Education Movement* (1905-1910), published in 1957.

²³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 158.

CHAPTER TEN

BANDE MATARAM

I

Mid-1906, and Sri Aurobindo was in Calcutta. At first he stayed with his friend and political associate, Raja Subodh Mullick, at his palatial residence, 12 Wellington Street. Perhaps Sri Aurobindo had temporary shelter for a few days at the *Yugantar* Office at Kanaidhar Lane before he shifted to Subodh Mullick's place. But here too he couldn't make a permanent stay, for that would have proved too embarrassing to the members of Mullick's family. Accordingly, Sri Aurobindo's resourceful factotum, Abinash Bhattacharya, found a separate place, first at Chhaku Khansama Lane, then 23 Scott's Lane, where Mrinalini and Sarojini (and for a time Barin) could also join them. What with the associate editorship of the newly started *Bande Mataram* and the Principalship of the Bengal National College—not to mention the behind-the-scenes contacts with the Nationalists and the underground direction of the revolutionaries—Sri Aurobindo had his hands full, and plenty to occupy his mind. He had, after all, taken the decisive plunge into the maelstrom, and the air was vibrant with singular expectancy.

Bepin Pal called his paper the *Bande Mataram* for a very good practical reason—but it was a leap of intuition as well. The movement against the partition of Bengal had, by mid-1906, spread out and boiled up so as to include much more than the opposition to the partition, and—by one of those unpredictable but amazing

quirks of fate — had come to be symbolised by the magic incantation “Bande Mataram!”, the opening words of Bankim Chandra’s song imbedded in his novel *Ananda Math*. At one extreme end, it was as though nothing but immediate full-fledged independence could satisfy the people’s pent-up hunger for freedom. At the other end, people simply fought for the right to sing the song at a time when the mere singing of the song seemed to sound like the death-knell of the British Raj to the perturbed pillars of the bureaucracy. At Barisal on 14 April 1906, for example, when the procession was being dispersed, the boy Chittaranjan — son of Manoranjan Guhathakurta, a stalwart of the nationalist movement — continued shouting *Bande Mataram!* while the police went on belabouring him even after he had fallen on the ground and was bleeding profusely. And everywhere — on railway platforms, in Court compounds and college corridors — *Bande Mataram* was at once the salvo of defiance of authority and a dedication to the service of the Mother. Earlier, in 1905, a young student of the Presidency College, Ullaskar Datta, had thrashed with his shoe the professor of philosophy, an Englishman, for making some disparaging remarks about the Bengalis. The thrashing had been followed by cries of *Bande Mataram* from “a hundred lusty throats”. The Principal of the College, a Bengali, could only note the self-evident fact: “I see, ‘Bande Mataram’ has become a war-cry”.¹ A war-cry indeed it became, and not in Bengal only, but over the entire subcontinent.

In Sri Aurobindo’s series of seven articles in the *Indu Prakash* (16 July to 27 August 1894) on Bankim Chandra Chatterji, there was a casual reference to *Ananda*

¹ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences* (1969), p 3

Math but no mention at all of the song, *Bande Mataram*. As a matter of fact, the song was very little known outside the circle of those who had read the novel itself. Composed around 1875 and included in the novel in 1882, the potency hidden in the song hadn't been suspected till twenty-three years later. Neither during the Ilbert Bill agitation nor the trial of Surendranath Banerjee in 1883 that provoked students' demonstrations was *Bande Mataram* sung as a battle-cry. It was first sung from the Congress platform by Rabin-dranath Tagore in 1896, but it made then no electric impact on the audience. Nine more years passed, and on 7 August 1905, thousands of students drawn from all communities gathered at noon at the College Square, in Calcutta and made a processionary march to the Town Hall, filling the air all the way with the cry of *Bande Mataram* and other slogans. At the Town Hall meeting, summoned to protest against the partition and to pass resolutions on Swadeshi and Boycott, somebody sang *Bande Mataram*, and at that moment—in that charged atmosphere—it ceased to be a mere song and became the *mantra* of nationalism, or *svadeshi atma*, as Tagore described it. It was an avalanche of the spirit, and nothing could now resist its progress. Town and countryside alike resounded with the battle-cry, it was as though some stimulating wine had gone into the people's heads and they needs must give expression to their sense of sudden exhilaration. The traditional religious worship of Mother Durga merged with the patriotic adoration of the country as the Mother, and so Durga and Bharati fused into Bhavani, "holder of multitudinous strength,—*bahubala dhārini*". Patriotism of an intellectual or emotional kind had been there for two or three decades, and

of course people talked of national unity and the need for service and the possible necessity for sacrifice of some sort. But these did not substantially alter the political situation. Something more was required. Although the wiring had been done and the bulbs fitted into the sockets, the electric contact was lacking still. The song sung at the psychological moment was the needed fuse, and at once the wires tingled with animation, and from the bulbs leapt out blinding light.

Writing in 1905, Satis Chandra Mukherjee of the Dawn Society wondered if Bankim himself could have dreamt of the transformation of the two opening words of his song into a national *mantra* of liberation:

The welkin now rings with *Bande Mataram*. The streets and the lanes of Calcutta and of the rest of the province resound with the solemn watchword *Bande Mataram* has stirred the hearts of the people to their depths.²

The two words — soft like silk yet taut with infinite power — carried their vibrations to the ends of India, and in distant Madras, for example, the young Tamil poet, Subramania Bharati, made them the refrain of some of his own tremendous patriotic songs:

Mother, we bow to thee
Victorious Mother ..

Be victory ours
Or defeat or death,
We stand united
And raise the chant

Mother, we bow to thee!

² Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo and The New Thought in Indian Politics*, p. xxi

Again:

We'll bow to the Mother
to Bharat the Mother...

Ashamed of subjection
The toil, shame, and blister,
We shall now end it all
And sing in chorus

*Vande Mataram!*³

While returning after attending the Benares Congress, Bharati had met Sister Nivedita who, in a single moment of spiritual contact, had ignited the fire in him to a fury of poetic and patriotic effort, and in April 1906 he became editor of *India*, a Tamil extremist paper in Madras. His writings and editorials breathed fire and brimstone, and so immediately overpowering were his patriotic songs that the Moderate leader, V. Krishna-swami Aiyar, insisted on financing the printing of 10,000 copies of the poems for free distribution. As in Bengal, as in Madras and Maharashtra and the Punjab, everywhere in India there was this new spirit, the "Bande Mataram" spirit; it was as though, after a long drought, the parched earth had received a downpour and quickened into spring life. And Sri Aurobindo read in it even an Asiatic awakening:

India received the ablution of the holy waters singing her sacred hymn *Bande Mataram* that filled the spaces of heaven with joyous echoes heard of the gods of old — and the nations of the earth listened to the song of unfree India and knew what it was — a voice in the chorus of Asiatic liberty.⁴

³ Prema Nandakumar, *Bharati in English Verse* (1958), pp. 55, 59-60.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought, p. in (from an article in the
24

II

A daily paper in English like the *Bande Mataram*, whatever the mesmerising appeal of its name, could hardly be run on the outlay of Rs. 500, with which Bepin Pal had launched it in a moment of enthusiasm. The fact that Sri Aurobindo had joined forces was no doubt a great accession of intellectual and spiritual strength, but even he — with his eye for practical realities — saw the need to put the paper on a sound financial footing and give it a strong party base. When Pal went on a tour of the eastern Districts of Bengal to spread the message of nationalism, Sri Aurobindo was in charge of the paper, and he took the opportunity to call a private meeting of the young nationalists to chalk out their future programme. He told them it was no use going on as before — sudden spasmodic action followed by long periods of apathy, haphazard alliances without continuing purpose or action — and what was therefore needed was an all-India nationalist party organised, not simply to indulge in irritant fireworks to embarrass the ruling leadership, but boldly to throw it out and capture the Congress organisation. The one all-India leader with the requisite intellectual and moral eminence and record of national service and sacrifice was Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and hence the nationalists of Bengal should join hands with those of Maharashtra, the Punjab and elsewhere, and follow Tilak's leadership. Secondly, to give the national party a mouthpiece on a nation-wide basis, the party should adopt the *Bande Mataram*, and give it adequate financial and other support. All this was agreed to, and it was also decided to

Bande Mataram of 15 July 1907).

incorporate a Bande Mataram Company to raise the necessary finance.⁵ In the meantime, Subodh and Nirod Mullick offered to keep the paper going, and Bepin Pal, enjoying as he did the support of C. R. Das and others, remained editor; but differences unfortunately developed between him and two of the editorial assistants, Shyamsundar Chakravarti and Hemendra Prasad Ghose, and so Pal retired towards the end of 1906. Although Sri Aurobindo wrote most of the leading articles and made other contributions as well, his name did not figure as Editor except once, and even then it was without his knowledge; and he was firm that the mistake should not recur. His editorial assistants — Shyamsundar, Hemendra Prasad and Bejoy Chatterjee — were also brilliant writers who could on occasion successfully imitate their chief. By the end of September, Sri Aurobindo and his three colleagues — B. C. Pal himself being away most of the time — had given the *Bande Mataram* its distinguishing stamp as the supreme hot-gospeller in the cause of national independence and regeneration. During October, November and the early part of December, Sri Aurobindo was rather seriously ill, and moved, first to his father-in-law Bhupal Chandra Bose's house in Serpentine Lane, and in December to his grandfather Rajnarain Bose's place in Deoghar. Restored to health, Sri Aurobindo returned to Calcutta well in time to attend the annual session of the Congress, which was to be held on 26 December.

It is difficult to recapture at this distance of time the phenomenal impact the *Bande Mataram* made on the English-knowing intelligentsia in Bengal and all-India. In Calcutta, there were well-established Anglo-Indian papers

⁵ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 50, 98.

like the *Englishman* and the *Statesman*, and to compete with them was not easy unless an altogether new force could be brought into play, and this is exactly what happened. In an incredibly short time, the paper became the barometer of nationalist thought, and for that very reason it became an eyesore to the Government, the Anglo-Indian press and the ultra-moderate or sheerly loyalist elements in the country. The editor of the *Statesman* seems to have bitterly complained that, although the editorial articles in the *Bande Mataram* were diabolically clever and crammed full of sedition between the lines, the paper was still legally unassailable because of the superlative skill of the writing. The Government too must have shared this view, for they didn't venture to prosecute the paper for its editorial or other articles, whether from Sri Aurobindo's or from the pen of any of his three editorial colleagues. It was nevertheless an editor of the *Statesman*, S. K. Ratcliffe, who paid a glowing tribute to Sri Aurobindo over forty years later. Writing to the *Manchester Guardian* in December 1950, Ratcliffe said that he knew Aurobindo Ghose as "a revolutionary nationalist and editor of a flaming newspaper which struck a ringing new note in Indian daily journalism". Describing the paper further, Ratcliffe wrote:

It had a full-size sheet, was clearly printed on green paper, and was full of leading and special articles written in English with brilliance and pungency not hitherto attained in the Indian press. It was the most effective voice of what we then called nationalist extremism.⁶

B. C. Pal himself paid this well-merited tribute to the Promethean touch Sri Aurobindo had given to the

⁶ Quoted in Purani, *Life*, p. 127.

Bande Mataram:

The hand of the master was in it from the very beginning. Its bold attitude, its vigorous thinking, its clear ideas, its chaste and powerful diction, its scorching sarcasm and refined witticism, were unsurpassed by any journal in the country, either Indian or Anglo-Indian.... Morning after morning, not only Calcutta but the educated community almost in every part of the country eagerly awaited its vigorous pronouncements on the stirring questions of the day.... Long extracts from it began to be reproduced in the exclusive columns of the *Times* of London".⁷

And the *Times* admitted that the *Bande Mataram* was edited with "a literary ability rare in the Anglo-native press"!

Certainly, in those days, it must have seemed to many that Sri Aurobindo's movements of thought as they were reflected in his writing were those of a man driven by a deity (or was it really a demon?). It is recorded by Radha Kumud Mookerjee that Manomohan Ghose "used to rush in utter anxiety to his brother Aurobindo to remind him that he was a born poet and should not plunge into politics".⁸ Yet Sri Aurobindo held on to his chosen course in life. But, then, weren't many of his articles in the *Bande Mataram* suffused with poetic feeling? Weren't many of his editorials compounded of passion and prophecy? It was not journalism, it was literature; it was not politics, it was a new religion, the religion of nationalism, the worship of Bhavani Bharati; and he was

⁷ From an article in *Svaraj*, reproduced in the *Karmayogin*, and later included in *Character Sketches*, pp. 94-5

⁸ Foreword to Haridas and Uma Mukherjee's *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics*, p. viii.

not wasting his time castigating the bureaucracy, he was instructing a whole nation in the alphabet of nationalism and patriotism. A single example may be given here. In an article on 'The Life of Nationalism' (16 November 1907),⁹ Sri Aurobindo served his readers a spicy dish, a *hors-d'œuvre* made up of contemporary history, Puranic story, political controversy and picturesque prophecy. It is a prolonged simile in which the birth and growth of Indian nationalism runs parallel to the Avatarhood of Krishna. There are four stages in this history: gestation and growth in secrecy or obscurity (Krishna in Gokul growing from infancy to youth), the leaping of the great name to light (the sudden coming from Gokul to Mathura causing amazement, alarm and fury to Kamsa), the season of trial and triumph (the hour of reckoning when the enemy "feels the grasp of the avenger on his hair and the sword of doom in his heart"), and finally the season of rule and fulfilment (the reign of Krishna in Dwaraka). The second period is the most exciting, for it is "the season of ordeal and persecution" whose blaze of glory only the "children of grace" will be able to see. The enemies will do everything in their power to destroy the new incarnation, the new idea, believing and not believing it, promulgating iniquitous ordinances, spreading persecution, enacting cruelty with "the rack and thumbscrew of old engines of torture" being brought out for use. Even of the nation to which the gospel is preached, the well-to-do, the high-priests, the men in position and authority receive the new idea — the new Avatar — with anger, fear and contempt: anger because the promised change might mean a jolt to their comfortable positions, fear because of the threa-

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 221-6.

tened upheaval and turmoil, and contempt because the new idea is unintelligible to the calculations of worldly wisdom, "the narrow systems of expediency and the pedantic wisdom of the schools". And yet the idea grows, the new faith will not be suppressed, and it simply cannot be:

...largely because of all the persecution, denunciation and disparagement, the idea gathers strength and increases; there are strange and great conversions, baptisms of whole multitudes and eager embracings of martyrdoms, and the reasonings of the wise and learned are no more heeded and the prisons of the ruler overflow to no purpose and the gallows bears its ghastly burden fruitlessly and the sword of the powerful drips blood in vain. For the idea is God's deputy, and life and death, victory and defeat, joy and suffering have become its servants and cannot help ministering to its divine purpose.

Was nationalism no more than a counsel of despair, the illegitimate issue of Lord Curzon, helped to birth by the skilful midwifery of Sir Bampfylde Fuller (Lieutenant-Governor of East Bengal)? No, a thousand times no:

Long before the advent of Curzonism and Fullерism, while the Congress was beslaving the present absolutist bureaucracy with fulsome praise... while it was singing hymns of loyalty and descanting on the blessings of British rule, Nationalism was already born.... It was not born and did not grow in the Congress pandal... nor in the brains of the Mehtas and Gokhales, nor in the tongues of the Surendranaths and Lalmohans, nor under the hat and coat of the denationalised ape of English speech and manners. It was born like Krishna in the prison-house,

in the hearts of men to whom India under the good and beneficent government of absolutism seemed an intolerable dungeon, to whom the blessings of an alien despotic rule were hardly more acceptable than plagues of Egypt... with whom a few seats in the Council or on the Bench and right of entry into the Civil Service and a free Press and platform could not weigh against the starvation of the rack-rented millions, the drain of our life-blood, the atrophy of our energies and the disintegration of our national character and ideals; who looked beyond the temporary ease and opportunities of a few... to the lasting pauperism and degradation of a great and ancient people. And Nationalism grew as Krishna grew who ripened to strength and knowledge, not in the courts of princes and the schools of the Brahmins, but in the obscure and despised homes of the poor and the ignorant. In the cave of the Sannyasin, under the garb of the friar, in the hearts of young men and boys many of whom could not speak a word of English but all could work and dare and sacrifice for the Mother, in the life of men of education and parts who had received the *mantra* and put from them the desire of wealth and honours to teach and labour so that the good religion might spread, there Nationalism grew slowly to its strength....

Krishna came to the world to destroy the Asuric power of Kamsa, and there could be no conciliation or co-existence for them. The Moderates — Gokhale with his debating skill, Rash Behari Ghosh with "his army of literary quotations and allusions" — tried to convince the British that conciliation *was* possible; but the British

knew better, it had to be a fight to the finish. And so Sri Aurobindo concludes with the magnificent peroration:

As neither the milk of Putana nor the hoofs of the demon could destroy the infant Krishna, so neither Riponism nor Poona prosecutions could check the growth of Nationalism while yet it was an indistinct force; and as neither Kamsa's wives nor his *viśakanyās* nor his mad elephants nor his wrestlers could kill Krishna revealed in Mathura, so neither a revival of Riponism nor the poison of discord... nor Fullerism plus hooliganism... can slay Nationalism now that it has entered the arena. Nationalism is an *avatār* and cannot be slain, Nationalism is a divinely appointed *śakti* of the Eternal and must do its God-given work before it returns to the bosom of the Universal Energy from which it came.

Rhetoric, glorious rhetoric, certainly; but also rhetoric charged with idealism, poetry, prophecy. Contemporary history is here raised to the level of myth, the idea of Avatarhood is translated into the reality of unfolding contemporary history. It is a comprehensively formulated epic simile, and the images of Indian tradition and the idiom of the English language fuse creatively in the masterly elaboration and splendid articulation of the entire essay.

One who reads the *Bande Mataram* articles today will be struck — as their readers of about sixty-five years ago must have been struck — by their unlaboured ease, their air of spontaneity, their unflinching gusto. There was evidently no "perspiration" behind the writing, for it must all have come out in a heady rush of thought and expression. Sri Aurobindo had little time to revise and refine, to pick his epithets, to chisel his images, to

measure his periods; the words apparently came "straight on" (as Mark Antony might have put it). It is said that once, when Shyamsundar Chakravarti asked for an article, Sri Aurobindo drew out some old packing paper from a pile on his table, and began writing and finished it in fifteen minutes — "not a scratch, not a change, not a moment's pause". And yet, the next day that article was to fan "the fire of patriotism in the hearts of Nationalists all over India".¹⁰ Here we have a hint of the terrific pressure behind Sri Aurobindo's writing, a pressure sustained as much by the inner fire as the revolutionary tempo of the times.

III

It is beyond the scope of this chapter or book to consider in detail Sri Aurobindo's innumerable contributions to the columns of the *Bande Mataram*. The paper had an influence that beyonded the limits suggested by the actual circulation figures, and this was so especially after the paper began to issue a weekly edition as well from 2 June 1907. People in distant corners of India did eagerly await the arrival of copies of the paper and read them with avidity and reverent care as if they were indeed the epistles of a modern Apostle. And as we examine the articles today, we can understand why Sri Aurobindo's contemporaries had to listen to him as to an instructor, as to a friend, as to a born leader of men. As we turn back the old leaves, we light upon so many brilliant and trenchant editorial contributions that we feel all but dazzled and dazed by their noble gait and

¹⁰ Purani, *Life*, p. 116.

solid and shining structure of argument. Sri Aurobindo often speaks in inspired tones, and he is weighty and solemn and grandly persuasive on those occasions. At other times, he is more of a superlatively clever controversialist and intellectual pugilist, and then we witness a true clash of arms, we watch with amusement (and pity) the hapless and cumbrous antagonist writhing in the nimble grasp of Sri Aurobindo. There are other occasions still when Sri Aurobindo is the tribune of the Indian people, and through him the disarmed and emasculated proletariat speak with awakened knowledge and pride and defiance to the civilised world in the strength of their new-found self-confidence and strength. The Prophet of renascent India, the Tribune of the people, the Quartermaster-General of the army of nationalists — these are some of the divers powers and personalities of Sri Aurobindo that we are privileged to glimpse in the *Bande Mataram* contributions; but even these are but partial manifestations and emanations of the central Power and Personality whose utter essence we ever vainly try to comprehend!

After Sri Aurobindo's assumption of the *de facto* editorship of the *Bande Mataram*, the first major issue that he had editorially to tackle was the forthcoming session of the Congress in Calcutta. Presently he fell ill, and made a brief trip to Deoghar, and perhaps — in spite of his health — toured Khulna and other places before returning to Calcutta. Dr. Krishnadhan was a household word in Khulna, and it was but natural that Sri Aurobindo should receive a warm welcome there. Back in Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo took stock of things and tried to mobilise the Nationalist (or "extremist") elements in readiness for the Congress session from 26 to 29 Decem-

ber. The Nationalists had earlier thought of Tilak as President of the Congress, but the Moderates, sensing trouble, had proposed the venerable Dadabhai Naoroji as the acceptable compromise candidate and got him back from England. Both sides looked forward to the deliberations with considerable anxiety. Although Bengal had its own Moderates in Surendranath Banerjea and Rash Behari Ghosh, Calcutta was more of a Nationalist stronghold because of the tempo generated by the partition. On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo knew that the Congress organisation as such was still controlled by the Moderates. A split was easy to bring about, but a capture of the organisation was rather more difficult. Sri Aurobindo's strategy therefore was to win over, if possible, Dadabhai Naoroji himself so that the Moderates would be obliged to meet at least half-way the Nationalists. The on-the-eve-of-the-Congress editorial in the *Bande Mataram* was in itself a piece of masterly strategy, for the article both flattered and warned Dadabhai by placing him in marked juxtaposition with Tilak:

Two men of the moment stand conspicuously before the eyes of the public.... Both of them are sincere patriots, both have done what work lay in them for their people and for the land that bore them; both are men of indomitable perseverance and high ability....

Having said so much, Sri Aurobindo adds: "but there the resemblance ends". After half-a-century's toils, Dadabhai was "worn and aged"; but Tilak came "with his face to the morning, a giant of strength and courage". The man of the past, and the man of the future! The old politics had no doubt brought about the renewal of public activity in India after the trauma of conquest by

a foreign power, and besides some experience had also been gained during "that long wandering in the desert of unrealities and futilities". Dadabhai himself had seized "on one great fact and enforced it in season and out of season... the terrible poverty of India and its rapid increase under British rule". He had lately gone beyond the customary Moderate stance and "frankly declared that freedom from foreign rule must needs be the only governing ideal of Indian politics". And Sri Aurobindo adroitly concluded his article thus:

The man who is responsible for that declaration ought to be no Moderate. His heart at least should be with us. That in India and in the Presidential chair of the Congress his voice also will be for, us we cannot so confidently forecast. If it is, his venerable sanction will be a support to our efforts; if not, his reticence or opposition will be no hindrance to our final triumph. For that which Time and Fate intend, no utterances of individuals however venerable or esteemed can delay or alter.

Apart from Tilak, there were present Lajpat Rai, G. S. Khaparde and other staunch Nationalists, and many of them met first at Subodh Mullick's place to mobilise their forces and finalise their strategy, and Sri Aurobindo took a prominent part in the private discussions. It was agreed that the Nationalists should press for adoption of independence, swadeshi, boycott and national education. As expected, they met with opposition from Moderate leaders like Pherozeshah Mehta, Gokhale, Madan Mohan Malaviya and Surendranath, and at one stage the Extremists seem to have staged even a "walk out". A new development was that the Moderates themselves put a little more heat into their speeches than usual. As

Ambika Charan Mazumdar has recorded:

Moderates and Extremists alike and with equal emphasis protested against the attitude of Government, with equal firmness deprecated an ignominious begging spirit, and urged the people to take their stand more upon justice than upon generosity and upon their own rights more than upon concessions of Government.¹¹

When Dadabhai himself inclined — be it ever so little — towards the Nationalist position, the Moderates made a virtue of necessity and adopted the four resolutions, though with some modifications. The resolutions certainly bore, to quote again the Moderate leader, Ambika Charan Mazumdar, “unmistakable evidence of the spirit of the times”.¹²

Although Sri Aurobindo had preferred to work behind the scenes during the Congress session, his deployment of the forces and his interventions were not a little responsible for the success of the Nationalists. Commenting on ‘The Results of the Congress’, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the issue of 31 December 1906: “our hopes have been realised, our contentions recognised, if not always precisely in the form we desired or with as much clearness and precision as we ourselves would have used, yet definitely enough for all practical purposes.... All that the forward party has fought for has in substance been conceded”. To end the wrangle between the Nationalists who wanted “independence” to be affirmed as the aim of the political movement and the Moderates who harped on the British connection, Dadabhai proposed “Swaraj” and this proved acceptable to all, though perhaps each party understood the word a little diffe-

¹¹ *Indian National Evolution* (1915), pp. 111-2. ¹² *ibid.*, p. 112.

rently.¹³ In any case, it was no small gain. It is curious how history tantalisingly repeats itself. Twenty years later, the issue of Independence *versus* Dominion Status was to be fought at the Madras, Calcutta and Lahore Congresses (1927-9) respectively. Once again — this time Mahatma Gandhi — tried to hedge, by avoiding both Independence and Dominion Status but reviving the familiar *Swaraj* and further qualifying it as *Purna Swaraj*!

Of the four planks (*chatus-sūtri*) in the new programme, — *Swaraj*, national education, *Swadeshi* and boycott, — Sri Aurobindo had expressed even in his “New Lamps for Old” articles (1893-4) his adhesion to the independence ideal, and in his “Bankim Chandra Chatterji” articles in the *Indu Prakash* (1894) his detestation of the system of education in India (“the very worst system of training”). Independence had to be wrested from the British, if necessary by a recourse to armed revolution; and the alien system of education had to be displaced by something more attuned to the local traditions and more capable of meeting local needs. As regards *swadeshi* and boycott, they were meant to be at once economic and political weapons, the same weapon in fact though double-edged. Even *charkha* (that was to be flourished as a talismanic cure-all by Mahatma Gandhi in the twenties and after) was advocated by Hironmoyee Devi, as reported in the *Bande Mataram* of 30 December 1906, for a sound reason:

¹³ According to the Israeli scholar, Daniel Argov, “Aurovindo Ghosh gave the clearest exposition of *Swaraj* by declaring it synonymous with independence—‘a free national Government unhampered even in the least degree by foreign control’” (*Moderates and Extremists in the Indian Nationalist Movement. 1883-1920*, 1967, p. 126.).

If we could not utilise the leisure of our women, which is now uselessly frittered away, in some small industries, assuming that *charkha* (the spinning wheel) cannot compete with machinery, it will yet give food to millions of starving women and find some useful work for those who have, for want thereof, to fritter away their leisure hours.

Sri Aurobindo had earlier wished to rope in the Indian industrialists, commercial and landed magnates into the movement so that "men of industrial and commercial ability and experience, and not politicians alone, could direct operations and devise means of carrying out the policy" (of swadeshi and boycott), but he had been told that the scheme was impracticable.¹⁴ But since boycott as such was a good political weapon against the rulers, the idea was pressed by both Tilak and Sri Aurobindo. Not that the idea hadn't been mooted before in India during the three decades preceding, but it became a truly effective weapon only from 7 August 1905 when it was adopted at the Calcutta Town Hall meeting to the fanfare of *Bande Mataram* singing and tempestuous cheers. Earlier, in February-March, one Tahal Ram Ganga Ram had visited Calcutta and exhorted college students to organise a boycott of British goods; on 13 July, Sri Aurobindo's maternal uncle, Krishna Kumar Mitra, had made a plea for boycott in his *Sanjivani*; and on 17 July, a correspondent "G" had strongly advocated boycott in the columns of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. Was "G" really Aurobindo Ghose? Was it Barindra Kumar Ghose?¹⁵ Anyhow, all climaxed in the events of 7

¹⁴ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 57.

¹⁵ See Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *India's Fight for Freedom, or The Swadeshi Movement 1905-6* (1958), pp 189-90.

August, and the swadeshi-boycott offensive received the tardy imprimatur of the Congress in December 1906. Sri Aurobindo had thus reason enough to feel satisfied with the "results" of the Calcutta Congress.

IV

During 1906-7, the usual criticism levelled by the Moderates against the Extremists (or Nationalists) was that the latter had no constructive ideas: that, while they demanded "independence", they had no sanctions or "practical programme" to enforce the demand. Motilal Nehru, for example, had described Extremist postures as being "evolved out of the depths of despair". In answer to this line of criticism, the *Bande Mataram* published from 10 April to 2 May 1907 a series of 14 articles under the general caption "New Thought". The first was by Satis Mukherjee, the rest by Sri Aurobindo — out of which, again, the first seven were an exposition of the "doctrine of Passive Resistance" and the rest were in the nature of ancillary comments. The "New Thought" was summed up, first negatively by Satis Mukherjee:

It is *not* the offspring of a spirit of revenge; it is *not* the advocating of mere measures of coercion and retaliation; it is *not* a mere suggestion of despair.

Then followed the "Passive Resistance" series, in which Sri Aurobindo discussed its possibilities as an instrument of political action — an instrument that has since "helped India more than any other to reach her goal".¹⁶ For an

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* (1952 edition), Publisher's Note.

enslaved country that desires liberation, only three courses are open: petitioning, self-development and self-help, and organised resistance to the rule by the alien. In the given Indian context, petitioning was unlikely to succeed; hence, self-help or resistance, one or both, had to be resorted to. A century of all-pervasive foreign despotism had induced in us a "fatal dependence, passivity, and helplessness"; and, therefore, we had first to "recover the habit of independent motion and independent action".¹⁷ Swadeshi, national education and arbitration were some of the planks on which self-help and self-development could take effective shape. But were the alien bureaucracy to offer opposition to our constructive programme — and this possibility had to be taken into account — we would then be obliged to offer resistance in our turn. "We have therefore not only to organise a central authority", said Sri Aurobindo, "not only to take up all branches of our national life into our hands, but in order to meet bureaucratic opposition and to compel the alien control to remove its hold on us, if not at once, then tentacle by tentacle, we must organise defensive resistance".¹⁸

Passive or defensive resistance — even like violent resistance — may have different ends, operate on different levels, and pursue different means. Were the Government indigenous, resistance could be offered to bring about the redress of particular grievances. But in subject nations "which mean to live and not to die", resistance — passive or active — "can have no less an object than an entire and radical change of the system of Government".¹⁹ Nation-wide agitation was carried on to achieve the annulment of the partition of Bengal — "pettiest and narrowest

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 8. ¹⁸ *ibid*, pp. 10-1. ¹⁹ *ibid*., p. 17

of all political objects" — as, in the Gandhian era, similar movements were to be started on the issue of the Kilafat, the salt tax, etc. But always, the swelling tide of the popular resentment refused to be so narrowly circumscribed, and the real aim of the movements was nothing less than the ending of "the bleeding to death of a country by foreign exploitation".²⁰ Thus our immediate problem as a nation was, "not how to be intellectual and well-informed or how to be rich and industrious, but how to stave off imminent national death, how to put an end to the white peril, how to assert ourselves and live".²¹ Sri Aurobindo did not rule out violence in all circumstances, but it appeared to him that the bureaucracy, not being of the ruthless Russian kind, could be effectively countered by passive resistance. Not that such a policy was dictated by weakness or cowardice, for a method of peaceful passive resistance, while it was less bold and aggressive in appearance than violent methods like guerilla warfare or armed insurrection, called "for perhaps as much heroism of a kind and certainly more universal endurance and suffering". In passive resistance, it is not a "daring minority" that "purchases with their blood the freedom of the millions"; it is the entire population that gets ready to "share in the struggle and the privation".²²

The means suggested by Sri Aurobindo for translating the idea of passive resistance into practicable and fruitful action rather anticipated the Gandhian programme of a later day. Boycott of Government schools and even "aided" schools, boycott of the alien courts of justice, non-payment of taxes, a general refusal of assistance to Government — these were to be the "methods" of the

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 22. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 26. ²² *ibid.*, p. 31.

new movement. Much of this resistance movement could be strictly legal, for it was no legal offence "to abstain from Government schools or Government courts of justice or the help and protection of the fatherly executive or the use of British goods".²³ As for non-payment of taxes, or the deliberate transgression of an unjust law, it came under what Gandhiji described as *satyagraha*. Sri Aurobindo therefore laid down as the first canon of passive resistance that "to break an unjust coercive law is not only justifiable but, under given circumstances, a duty".²⁴ Likewise, coercive orders — this was the second canon — had to be resisted as a duty. And the third canon of the movement was that social boycott was "legitimate and indispensable as against persons guilty of treason to the nation":

'Boycott foreign goods and boycott those who use foreign goods' — the advice of Mr. Subramania Aiyer to the countrymen in Madras — must be accepted by all who are in earnest... without the social boycott, no national authority depending purely on moral pressure can have its decrees effectively executed...²⁵

At the time of the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhiji to redress the "Punjab-Kilafat" wrongs, it was often pointed out that the movement was "illegal"; and C. Rajagopalachari then argued that the movement was quite "legal" because the non-cooperators did not shirk the consequences of their action! The attack and the defence were both anticipated by Sri Aurobindo in 1907: "In a peaceful way we act against the law or the executive, but we passively accept the legal consequences".²⁶ But whereas Gandhiji maintained that violence

²³ *ibid.*, p. 48 ²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 53 ²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 58 ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 62

was to be eschewed in all circumstances, Sri Aurobindo felt that passive and peaceful resistance was possible only so long as the actions of the bureaucracy were themselves "peaceful and within the rules of the fight". In a concluding eloquent passage, Sri Aurobindo deftly gathered into one moving symphony the divers scattered strains of argument, exhortation, poetry and prophecy:

The work of national emancipation is a great and holy *yajna* of which boycott, swadeshi, national education and every other activity, great and small, are only major or minor parts. Liberty is the fruit we seek from the sacrifice and the Motherland the goddess to whom we offer it; into the seven leaping tongues of the fire of the *yajna* we must offer all that we have, feeding the fire even with our blood and lives and happiness of our nearest and dearest; for the Motherland is a goddess who loves not a maimed and imperfect sacrifice, and freedom was never won from the gods by a grudging giver. But every great *yajna* has its Rakshasas who strive to baffle the sacrifice, to bespatter it with their own dirt or by guile or violence put out the flame. Passive resistance is an attempt to meet such disturbances by peaceful and self-contained *Brahmatej*; but even the greatest Rishis of old could not, when the Rakshasas were fierce and determined, keep up the sacrifice without calling in the bow of the Kshatriya...

Vedantism accepts no distinction of true or false religions, but considers only what will lead more or less surely, more or less quickly to *moksha*, spiritual emancipation and the realisation of the Divinity within. Our attitude is a political Vedantism.

India, free, one and indivisible, is the divine realisation to which we move, — emancipation our aim.... Passive resistance may be the final method of salvation in our case or it may be only the preparation for the final *sadhana*. In either case, the sooner we put it into full and perfect practice, the nearer we shall be to national liberty.²⁷

In the remaining six articles, Sri Aurobindo underlined certain aspects of the passive resister's preparation for the ordeal ahead of him. First in importance was faith: "faith in ourselves, faith in the nation, faith in India's destiny". Faith as well as hope — hope that the Nationalists' aims were capable of early realisation and would be realised. And what were those aims? The Loyalists wanted only good government, with some share in the administration; the Moderates hoped for a colonial type of self-government at some future time; but the Nationalists wanted "independence" (within or outside the Empire), and were not prepared to wait indefinitely for its consummation (this was their only "extremism"!). Regarding the question of India's loss of liberty in the past, Sri Aurobindo had some pertinent things to say:

It was not from the people of India that India was won by Moghul or Briton, but from a small privileged class. On the other hand, the strength and success of the Mahrattas and Sikhs in the eighteenth century was due to the policy of Shivaji and Guru Govind which called the whole nation into the fighting line.²⁸

When that cohesion or that discipline failed, the Mahratta and the Sikh power also dissipated itself. The alien rule could thrive only so long as it was not opposed by

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 77-9. ²⁸ *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought*, p. 26.

a "universal political consciousness in the subject nation". It was thus infantile to assume that the foreigner was paternally or benevolently interested in training the subject nation in the tasks of self-government. On the other hand, the alien bureaucracy was really engaged in keeping the country in a state of permanent political paralysis.

The bureaucracy which rules us... holds and draws nourishing sustenance for itself from the subject organism by means of tentacles and feelers thrust out from its body thousands of miles away. Its type in natural history is not the parasite, but the octopus. Self-government would mean the removal of the tentacles and the cessation both of the grip and the sustenance.²⁹

Only a united India could fight this evil, but how was such unity to be brought about? The divided Hindu sects could once again rediscover their unity in the larger spiritual truths of Hinduism, the Hindu and Muslim could become habituated to one another and overcome their religious differences in the consciousness of a common motherland and a common destiny (as had happened in Akbar's time), but the complicating factor was the presence of the alien, something "superimposed on the native-born population, without any roots in the soil." This heavy and superior presence had brought all Indians "to a certain level of equality by equal inferiority to the ruling class". The British rulers, having eliminated or reduced to impotence or misery the three centres of organised strength in pre-British India — the local Kings, the landed aristocracy and the vast peasantry organised as village communities — wanted at last to suppress the

²⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

new class, the rising middle class, the very class that British rule and English education had helped to bring into existence with arenas for self-expression such as the Bar, the University, the Press, the Municipalities and Local Boards, and even the Legislative Council. In this crisis, what the middle class had to do was to refuse to be frightened or bribed or further divided by the crafty rulers, but rather to identify itself with the proletariat or the mass of the people and organise them for resisting and ending the alien despotism. The octopus had to be attacked and destroyed before it succeeded in destroying the remaining signs of life in the nation.

Sri Aurobindo saw that the times were such that constant vigilance was necessary on the part of the Nationalists. There was, on the one hand, "the Pharisaical cant" of the Anglo-Indians, and, on the other, the ready and tame acquiescence of the anglicised denationalised Indians. Sri Aurobindo had little difficulty in exposing "the heartless hypocrisy, the intolerable sanctimony" of the Anglo-Indian advisers

...who first make sure that only such education is imparted to our people as would effectively cripple their mental and moral faculties for the assimilation and execution of progressive ideas, and also that all the necessary steps are taken for the preservation of our economic serfdom, and then turn round to us and tell us that we must renovate our decaying society and industries before we can have even the right to cherish political ideals.³⁰

The worldly-wise Indian, of course, was a prey to "a hydra-brood of delusions, — two springing up where one is killed": for example, that regeneration could come

³⁰ *Bande Mataram*, 8 July 1907.

through prayerful petitioning, that religious revival or doses of industrialisation could revitalise us! But Sri Aurobindo was able, through an appeal to history and common sense and some douche of satire, to shatter those delusions.³¹ He was, however, gratified that the younger generation at least had valiantly risen to the occasion. The boys had, in fact, been the very soul of the Swadeshi movement. Nay more: they had even taught their parents — “the loyal or stingy father and the foppish mother” — the meaning of patriotism, and with their “divine enthusiasm, indomitable courage and energy of wonderful sacrifice”, they had added a bright chapter to recent Indian history. In this they had only emulated the doings of youth elsewhere —

Mazzini depended on young Italy... When the insurrection broke out at Bologna, the leaders were chiefly students of the University.... In Milan, a crowd assembled before the Government House whereupon the soldiers fired a bland volley to disperse them. A mere boy shouted ‘Vive l’Italia’ and discharged his pistol at the soldiers and his example was at once followed by the mob behind him. The guard was overpowered, the tricolour hoisted on the Government buildings and the Governor himself was made a prisoner.³²

And the boy heroes in our Puranas: Dhruva, Prahlad, Krishna himself! And Chittaranjan Guhathakurta at Barisal! Young men had no lack of examples, whether drawn from literature and myth or from modern European or contemporary Indian history. The “Hour of God” had brought out these young men — and many not so young — from out of “the narrow and confined track” of their

³¹ *ibid.*, 5 April 1907. ³² *ibid.*, 12 April 1907.

humdrum lives, and they had seen with surprising suddenness "the august face of their destiny"; and to their eager eyes had been vouchsafed some contours at least of the beckoning image of the Future.³³ Having glimpsed that vision, they wouldn't be held back — whatever the hazards ahead.

V

In that brief latter-day Heroic Age, every day was a hundred days, for in the "Hour of God" seconds might determine the fate of years (or even centuries), and in an atmosphere made murky, in a country that wished suddenly to shake off the lethargy of many decades, at a time when old men somnolently fooled and children precociously enacted martyrdom, at such a time the art of generalship called for an intuitive grasp of possible future developments, for matchless courage and for *mantric* "orders of the day". The *Bande Mataram* could hardly be kept going according to conventional standards of financial or journalistic propriety. Every day there was a crisis. Every day a crisis somewhere or other asked to be commented upon in the paper. One day it was the bureaucracy-inspired hooliganism at Jamalpore in the Mymensingh District. Another day it was the blow struck at the *Punjabee*, or the threatened action against Lala Hansraj and Sardar Ajit Singh, or the deportation of the Lion of the Punjab, Lajpat Rai. Yet another day it was the onslaught on the universities and other educational institutions. Or it was the arrest and imprisonment of Bhupendranath Datta, editor of the *Yugantar*. Every

³³ *ibid.*, 29 June 1907.

day some enormity or other was happening, and Sri Aurobindo happened to know much more about those things than most politicians, even most Nationalists, for he had his links with the underground Revolutionaries too. He was teaching at the National College — he was editing the *Bande Mataram* — he was keeping an eye on the *Yugantar* — he was directing the Nationalist movement in Bengal and following its fortunes (or misfortunes) in the other Provinces — and he was also maintaining pretty close contact with the Revolutionary groups. It was a five-fold responsibility, an Atlas' load, that he was carrying during those disturbed and disturbing days. In a letter to his wife, Mrinalini, dated 17 February, Sri Aurobindo reveals by implication both the condition of his mind and the nature of his activities, although little is actually said, much is suggested by the disarming words:

My coming to meet you on the 4th January was settled, but I could not come.... I had to go where the Lord led me.... I had gone for His work. The state of my mind, at present, has totally changed; more than that I would not reveal in this letter. Come here, then I will tell you... henceforward I am no longer my own master; I will have to go like a puppet, wherever the Divine takes me; I shall have to carry out like a puppet whatever he makes me to do.... You may come to think that I am neglecting you and doing my work. But do not think so... you will have to understand that all that I do does not depend on my own will, but is done according to the command of the Divine. When you come here, you will be able to understand fully the meaning of my words. I hope the Lord will

show you the light of His infinite Grace which He has shown me, but it all depends upon His will.... The letter was written from the Scots Lane residence, and Mrinalini was at the time living at Deoghar with Sarojini. But what the letter really reveals is that Sri Aurobindo, already in early 1907, was a descended God, or at least a God-driven human instrument, engaging in multiple-tasks with a sense of preordained inevitability. To measure Sri Aurobindo's actions or words — to measure the man himself — in terms of a human calculus applicable to other men would thus not lead us anywhere. In that age of supermen — for among the Nationalists there were personalities like Tilak, Lajpat Raj, Ajit Singh, Bepin Pal, Aswini Kumar Dutt, Subramania Bharati, Chidambaram Pillai — Sri Aurobindo somehow indisputably steamed foremost, for it was more than human ability that sustained him, it was more than political leadership that he gave his people. As the historian R. C. Majumdar has pointed out,

While Tilak popularised politics and gave it a force and vitality it had hitherto lacked, Aurobindo spiritualised it and became the high priest of Nationalism as a religious creed. He revived the theoretical teachings of Bankim Chandra and Vivekananda... placed the country on the altar of God and asked for suffering and self-immolation as the best offerings for His worship.³⁴

And Sister Nivedita and others who watched Sri Aurobindo at close quarters could see that he was a man of God, that his Nationalism was really a new religion. If it was the purpose of religion to take men to

³⁴ *Studies in the Bengali Renaissance* (quoted in the *Bulletin*, November 1963, pp 78, 80).

God, it was the purpose of the religion of Nationalism to bring men to their Mother, India — Bhavani Bharati or Prabuddha Bharata! To strive for the country, for India, was work for the Divine, and the Divine would give one the necessary strength to fight on, to persevere, even to sacrifice one's life if that should become necessary.

It is only against such a background — a religious or rather a spiritual view of political thought and campaigning — that one can hope to follow Sri Aurobindo's actions and writings of this period. Superficially, with his manifold burdens, Sri Aurobindo was like the proverbial Indian juggler who is expected to keep half a dozen balls simultaneously in the air. But it was inner spiritual strength that sustained Sri Aurobindo, it was the inner fire that kept the instrument functioning infallibly. It is indeed astonishing that, although working under such varieties of pressure, Sri Aurobindo's words, like his actions, should have uncannily fused poise and purpose, steadiness and strength. After the Jamalpore hooliganism, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the issue of 27 April 1907:

The desecrated shrine, the outraged sanctity of religion, the blood of our kindred, the offended honour of our cause and country — all cry out for succour and vindication. They lay bare the policy of the alien bureaucracy and show the helpless nature of our position in the absence of the necessary organisation.

Within a fortnight, Sri Aurobindo returned to the theme to echo Tilak's warning to the Bengalis in the *Kesari*, and concluded with the ominous words:

It is inhuman to still busy ourselves with our

selfish interests and pursuits.... The country in which the cry of outraged chastity rises day after day unavenged to heaven is doomed to ruin. The Government which permits it and stands looking on smiling and with folded hands is already doomed by the justice of heaven.... But we too who look on while our sisters and mothers are outraged, — against us too the doom will go forth unless we act before it is too late.³⁵

The Risley Circular of 6 May provoked appropriate comment two days later:

This ukase out-Russias Russia.... Not even the omnipotent Tsar has dared to issue an ukase so arbitrary, oppressive and inquisitorial.... It means, if there is a grain of self-respect left in the country, that the Government University will perish and a National University be developed. And for this reason we welcome the circular....

In the issue of 29 May, he returned to the subject and called for an "Educational Strike", for not otherwise could the infamous challenge of the Risley Circular be adequately met:

...the whole nation is on trial, — professors, teachers and students are all confronted with the choice of signing themselves serfs and, in the case of the former, paid detectives as well and tools for doing the dirty work of the bureaucracy or of severing their connection with a university so shamefully fettered and turned to vile uses.... The choice is too plain to be blinked at or ignored. We must either submit to the deprivation of our natural liberties or dissociate ourselves from Government

³⁵ *Bande Mataram*, 9 May 1907.

and aided schools and colleges. The first is unthinkable, and the second is therefore our only course. As regards the developing situation in the Punjab, Sri Aurobindo's pen-picture in the issue of 6 May projects almost a foreshadowing of the Amritsar atrocities of twelve years later:

Britain the benevolent, Britain the mother of Parliaments, Britain the champion of liberty, Britain the deliverer of the slave — such was the sanctified and legendary figure which we have been trained to keep before our eyes... we have a companion picture (in the Punjab) to that dream of a benevolent and angelic Britain, — a city of unarmed men terrorised by the military, the leaders of the people hurried from their daily avocations to prison, siege-guns pointed at the town, police rifles ready to fire on any group of five men or more to be seen in the street, bail refused to respectable pleaders and barristers from sheer terror of their influence. Look on this picture, then on that!

Lala Lajpat Rai's deportation followed on 9 May, and two days later Sri Aurobindo wrote editorially in the *Bande Mataram*:

The bureaucracy has declared with savage emphasis that it will tolerate a meekly carping loyalism, it will tolerate an ineffective agitation of prayer, protest and petition, but it will not tolerate the New Spirit.

But was the country going to be cowed down because a leader here had been arrested, another there intimidated, and a third deported? There was a Leader behind the leaders, and that was the Leader the country had been following and would follow still:

The King whom we follow to the wars today is our own Motherland, the sacred and imperishable; the leader of our onward march is the Almighty Himself, that element within and without us whom sword cannot slay, nor water drown, nor fire burn, nor exile divide from us, nor a prison confine. Lajpat Rai is nothing, Tilak is nothing, Bepin Pal is nothing! These are but instruments in the mighty Hand that is shaping our destinies and if these go, do you think God cannot find others to do His will? If Lalaji had been taken from his people, men even greater and stronger would take his place. If persecution struck down one worthy representative of a living cause, there would arise, "like the giants from the blood of Raktabij", men of redoubled or quadrupled strength:

It was the exiled of Italy, it was the men who languished in Austrian and Bourbon dungeons, it was Poerio and Silvio Pellico and their fellow sufferers whose collected strength reincarnated in Mazzini and Garibaldi and Cavour to free their country. When John Morley, as Secretary of State, tried to defend the indefensible in Parliament, when he (and Lord Minto the Viceroy) tried simultaneously to brandish, in one hand the sword of repression and in the other the minichocolate of coming reforms, Sri Aurobindo remarked with a touch of acid in the issue of 16 May.

We have heard of a despotism tempered by epigrams and a despotism tempered by assassination, but this is the first time we hear of a self-government tempered by deportations.... Coerce, if you will, — we welcome coercion, but be sure that it will rank the whole of India against you without distinction of parties.

Again, the very next day, commenting on the apologia offered by the *Statesman*:

Prodigious! A man is arrested without any charge being formulated against him, without trial, without any chance of defending himself, separated suddenly from his family and friends.. and relegated to solitary imprisonment in a distant fortress; yet because he is not treated as Mr. Tilak was treated, as a common criminal,... this remarkable Liberal organ goes into ecstasies over the leniency of the British bureaucracy!

Although such castigation, whether of the declared enemy or of the more dangerous seeming friend, was sometimes necessary and had to be administered with surgical precision and ease, Sri Aurobindo gave far more importance to the positive evangelical aspect of his editorial responsibility — namely, to summon India and Indians to a realisation of their Divine mission. “Swadeshism” was much more than political economy, it was rather a call to self-respect, self-knowledge and self-realisation. In a superb article in the issue of 11 September 1907, Sri Aurobindo linked India’s resurgence with Asia’s, and contrasted it with Western “progress” which, for all its glittering material prizes, was in reality a delusion and a snare. In times of benumbing darkness, when hope lies nearly dead, when the impulse to life is atrophied, when suspicion and suicidal division prowl about, it is in such moments of extremity that the Divine invasion and afflatus has turned winter into sudden spring:

Human progress seems always to have depended on the reawakening touch of some divine impulse whenever the spirit of man flagged and failed.... These visitations of immortality in man have been

known by different names such as Buddhism, Christianity, the Renaissance, Vaishnavism and the like Asia forgetful, decadent, dying in "the scorching drought of modern vulgarity" needed most the purifying ablution of such a wave; and it has now come at its appointed hour crested with all the glory of her own ideals, giving India back the long-lost treasure of her race, the passion for self-knowledge, called by us National Education.... It is only by growing to know herself that she can learn to shun like deadly poison all those misnamed ideals so dear to the West: the industrialism that dwarfs the worker down to the pin's point over which it is his miserable lot to work out his very life; the commercialism that floods the world with ugly and worthless wares owing nought to beauty or religion; the piety that results in the sending of panoplied missions with more reliance on gunpowder than on God; the gluttonous earth-hunger whetted with cruelty, carnage and all manner of godlessness cloaked by the cunning of a mere word, Imperialism.

The worship of the gods of external life had led the West (and those who had followed the Western lead) to a bleak desert of parched inner life. On the contrary, poverty and squalor and slothful underemployment as were (and still are!) prevalent in India couldn't prove favourable soil for the cultivation of inner health and happiness and peace. The proletariat in India (and Asia and Africa) needed "wealth and abundance" because without food and clothes no worthwhile life was possible; and swaraj or self-rule was needed too, because "without it she cannot possibly bring about those conditions under which only she would be able to re-enthroned the faith

that is in her in its integrity". Bread and butter were not ends in themselves, but they were a necessary base; hence the need to end political serfdom and economic paralysis through the unfaltering pursuit of the ideal of Swadeshi in its whole arc of significance from the material to the spiritual. With a revived India as a result of Swaraj, it would once again be "a pride to live in her, a privilege to die for her".

This was no clever editor, no nimble controversial pugilist, no adroit manipulator of a popular communication medium — though he *seemed* to be these too! — but a power that exceeded them all: this was a Messiah, a God-Man, a redeemer who had taken birth to lead a fallen people out of the cold and the dark into the sunlit spaces of a warm new day. In his writing there was no tinge of mere racial hatred of the British, and his plea for Swaraj went beyond the charge of tyranny against an alien government. True self-government in the sense of self-reliance and self-knowledge and self-mastery was a Vedantic as much as a political objective: more Vedantic, in fact, than purely political. The whole Aurobindonian thesis, a unique amalgam of patriotic fervour and Vedantic idealism, was thus brilliantly summed up at the time by B. C. Chatterji:

The aspirations of Young India were in his writings, a divining intention of the spirit of liberty, the beating of whose wings was being heard over Asia; an exaltation, an urgency, a heartening call on his countrymen to serve and save the Motherland, an impassioned appeal to their manhood to reinstate her in the greatness that was hers. Had she not once been the High Priestess of the Orient? Has not her civilisation left its ripple-mark on the fur-

thermost limits of Asia? India still had a soul to save, which the parching drought of modern vulgarity threatened daily with death; she alone in a pharisaical world, where everyone acclaimed God in speech and denied Him in fact, offered Him the worship of her heart; she alone yet gave birth to the choice spirits who cast aside the highest of earth's gifts in their enraptured pursuit of the life of life. Show us the country but India that could produce in the nineteenth century the Saint of Dakshinেশ্বর. The saving wisdom was still in the land which taught man how to know and realise his God....

But how should the culture of the soul survive in the land where a shifting materialism was asserting itself under the aegis of foreign rule? Had not the fools and the Philistines, whose name was Legion — the monstrous products of a soulless education nourished on the rind of European thought — already begun to laugh at their country's past? And dared to condemn the wisdom of their ancestors? Was India to deform herself from a temple of God into one vast inglorious suburb of English civilisation? Even beauty, the vernal Goddess enshrined in her hymns and her poetry, was feeling the country chased by a hungry commercialism pouring out its flood of ugly and worthless wares owing naught to art or religion. This doom that impended over the land must be averted. India must save herself by ending the alien domination which had, not only impoverished her body, but was also strangulating her soul. It was only in an independent India, with the reins of self-determination in her own hands,

that the ideal could be re-enthroned in its integrity of high thinking and holy living, which cast on every man the obligation to cultivate throughout life the knowledge of Atman (Self and God), and of striving to realise in conduct the code of humanity that Gautama Buddha enjoined. It was from the height of this vision of India to be that he called upon his countrymen to prepare themselves to be free, and not for the mere secularity of autonomy and wealth, the pseudo-divinities upon whose altars Europe has sacrificed her soul and would some day end by immolating her very physical existence.³⁶

Such a message, delivered week after week in the prophetic accents of such a person as Sri Aurobindo, was a perfervid challenge to the race and a call to action; and the response was immediate, for "the nation felt a quickening in the beating of its heart, a stirring in its blood, the vibration of chords long silent in its race consciousness".³⁷

VI

The so-called Minto-Morley proposals for constitutional reform were the subject of editorial comment in the *Bande Mataram* on more than one occasion. The agitation against the partition of Bengal had become a nation-wide affair, had made the boycott of British goods an effective political weapon and had waxed into a demand for independence. These were met by ruthless repression. But a weak dose of "reform" too had become

³⁶ Quoted in Ronaldshay's *The Heart of Aryavarta* (1925), pp. 89-91.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 91.

necessary to assuage the outraged feelings of the people. In May 1907, the Government of India promulgated an Ordinance forbidding meetings without prior official permission. The Ordinance was made applicable, first to Lahore on 11 May and on 18 May to Barisal in East Bengal. Writing on 16 May in the *Bande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo called the Ordinance "the latest act of mediaeval tyranny" and tore the veil of British hypocrisy and charged Morley himself with insincerity and lack of principle. Then came the reference to the reform proposals in the air:

For some time Mr. Morley and Lord Minto... have been talking big of some wonderful reform that they have up their sleeves and feverishly assuring the world that these fine things are all their very own idea and by no means forced on them by Indian agitation.

When later the actual "proposals" were made public, the *Bande Mataram* called them "comic opera" reforms, and witheringly pointed out that "the right place for this truly comic Council of Notables with its yet more comic functions is an opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, and not an India seething with discontent and convulsed by the throes of an incipient revolution".³⁸ Sri Aurobindo returned to the theme in later issues and poured ridicule both on Mr. Morley the co-author of the reforms and on the proposals as well. People in India were not used to "the habit of following the turns of British parliamentary eloquence or reading between the lines of the speech of a Cabinet Minister"; the *dhwani* was often very different from the articulated verbiage. Superficially, the proposed Council of Notables, the to-be-expanded Legis-

³⁸ The *Bande Mataram* (Weekly Edition), 9 June 1907.

lative Councils, the likely admission of Indian members to the India Council and the possibility of greater decentralisation in the administration, all had the vague look of "progress" — one step further from colonialism towards self-government. But apply the lens and see, and something very different revealed itself:

All the reforms have one single object, one governing idea, — an absolute personal despotic British control *in touch with the people....* To maintain in India an absolute rule as rigid as any Tsar's; to keep that rule in close touch with the currents of Indian sentiment, opinion and activity, and to crush any active opposition by an immediate resort to the ordinary weapons of despotism, ordinances, deportations, prosecutions and a swift and ruthless terrorism, this is Morleyism.. .

What, then, had happened to Morley the great "liberal" statesman? India's disillusionment was not very different from that of the imaginary African chief, as described in Lytton Strachey's 'Bonga-Bonga in Whitehall' in *Characters and Commentaries*. In the editorial entitled 'Biparita Buddhi' in the issue of 26 June 1907, Sri Aurobindo as good as skinned alive the suave philosopher veiled in ornamental Liberalism who hid within "the typical John Bull with the full equipment of tiger qualities"; he learned his politics from the Anglo-Indian press in India, his poetry from Rudyard Kipling, his history from records of oppression:

Shakespeare and Milton did not illumine his imagination when he peered into the future of India. Mill, Carlyle or Herbert Spencer did not shed any light on his reasoning when he applied himself to the study of the problems in India. Hume, Froude,

Kingsley or Freeman did not help him at all in taking a correct reading of events and their bearings. Neither Chatham nor Wilberforce nor even Mr. Gladstone stood by him with their enlightened statesmanship when he gave his seal of approval to the despotic acts of Sir Denzil Ibbetson. Chatham... rose from his sick-bed, was literally carried to the House, entered his last protest against the employment of German mercenaries for suppressing the natural aspirations of the people (of America) of his own blood; but this erstwhile most liberal statesman of England does not show even any lurking sympathy for the natural hankering after liberty without which a man is no man. The atmosphere of the India House, the debasing responsibility of office, the intoxication of power has brought out the Jingo and killed the man.

There was such a thing as *biparita buddhi* or perverse mentality, and this had wholly infected Morley, and perhaps this too was the preordained way in which things had to be fulfilled in India:

Mr. Morley is a victim to this *biparita buddhi*, as his predecessors were on the eve of the American Revolution, as Duryodhana and Dhritarashtra were on the eve of the battle of Kurukshetra, as Ravana was before the fall of the mighty Rakshasa kingdom, as the ancient tyrants or the French monarchs were before they made way for the emancipation of their section of humanity.... The *biparita buddhi* that helps the regeneration of weak and oppressed peoples is manifestly at work. We welcome it....

Sri Aurobindo's rhetorical method is to pile up to overwhelming effect illustration upon illustration, as if he

were raining hammer-blow on hammer-blow; this is brilliant jiu-jitsuing, the opponent being worsted every time.

The *Bande Mataram* also carried certain snappy items like satiric compositions and parodies, many of which were the work of Shyamsunder Chakravarti, though of course Sri Aurobindo's inspiration was there too. Shyamsundar was a witty parodist and could write with much humour and he could be tellingly rhetorical as well; he had caught up some imitation of Sri Aurobindo's prose style and many could not at once distinguish between their writings. Whenever Sri Aurobindo was away from Calcutta, Shyamsundar had to do much of the editorial work and write the leading articles, unless Sri Aurobindo sent them from Deoghar or wherever he was camping at the time. One of Shyamsundar's successful skits was the "mock-petition" to "Honest John", a piece of vigorous and stinging satire which was printed in the inaugural issue of the Weekly edition of the *Bande Mataram* on 2 June 1907. When the skit was later reproduced in the *Glasgow News*, it created quite a stir in Britain — a stir that had its official repercussions in India.

As a politician, it was a matter of principle with Sri Aurobindo never to "appeal" to the British people; and the *Bande Mataram* also avoided any such exercise in mendicancy. But the paper certainly tried to prod and awaken the Indian nation from its unconscionable slumber. Sri Aurobindo's *Vidula* — to which reference has already been made in an earlier chapter (IV. vi) — appeared in the second issue of the *Bande Mataram Weekly*, which also contained Shyamsundar's "Unreported Conversation" in verse between a Briton and

Ajit Singh on the eve of the latter's arrest. Another striking item in the issue was "Pagri Samalo, Jata", a free rendering by Shyamsundar of the poem that used to be sung by the Jats to rouse their countrymen to protest against the imposition of iniquitous taxes. *Perseus the Deliverer*, Sri Aurobindo's poetic play, began as a serial in the issue of 30 June, and the readers of the Weekly must have seized the import of the word "Deliverer" hammered on the consciousness again and again. In the issue of 7 July, again, the *Bande Mataram* merely reprinted Wilfrid Blunt's poem "Wind and the Whirlwind", and left it by itself to speak in defence of Indian nationalism. In the next issue of the weekly edition, Shyamsundar transferred, by sleight of hand, the "Trial Scene" in *The Merchant of Venice* to a Calcutta Police Court. The editor of the *Yugantar* is Antonio, and the denizens of "Law and Order" constitute Shylock. It is all in Shakespeare; but the derogation is directly aimed at the repressive policy of the Government.

A week later, the satirical poet turned his attention to the place-seekers and title-hunters who weakened the Nationalist case. "A Hymn to the Supreme Bull" is supposedly the Mantra of these people, who raise their hands in abject prayer to the Supreme Bull and beat their breasts and scream the while:

Hail, sempiternal Lord! Be bounteous still
 To give us only titles and posts, and if sedition
 Hath gathered aught of evil, or concealed,
 Disperse it, as your police disperse our crowds.³⁹

The aim of these satirical shafts was to hit the bull's-eye every time, and that they did indeed; and yet where

³⁹ 21 July 1907 (Weekly Edition)

people had the rhinoceros' skin, such arrows could effect no more than pin-pricks. But on a total view, the *Bande Mataram* had brought about no mean revolution in political thought in India during the first twelve months of its career, and hence felt justified in writing on the occasion of the anniversary:

It (the paper) came into being in answer to an imperative public need and not to satisfy any private ambition or personal whim; it was born in a great and critical hour for the whole nation and has a message to deliver, which nothing on earth can prevent it from delivering.... It claims that it has given expression to the will of the people and sketched their ideals and aspirations with the greatest amount of fidelity.

VII

If only the Government had left the *Bande Mataram* alone! But the *biparita buddhi* walked into the Council chamber and lo! the Government decided to prosecute the *Bande Mataram*: not even the paper itself, but one individual particularly, Sri Aurobindo, because he was supposed to be the infernal brain behind it. But there were difficulties. It was easy enough to launch a prosecution against the *Yugantar*, because it preached more than sedition: it preached revolution itself. But the *Bande Mataram*, although in its subtle and suggestive way it was an even more dangerous paper, had kept itself uncannily within the four corners of the existing law. And so Government, having decided on the prosecution, now brought against the paper the charge of

having reproduced translations of certain articles that had earlier appeared in the *Yugantar* and also for the printing of a "Letter to the Editor" entitled "Politics for Indians" in the Dak edition of the *Bande Mataram* of 28 July 1907. Sri Aurobindo went at once to the Detective Police Office for surrendering himself. From there he was taken to Poddopukur Thana, but was soon released on bail. Two gentlemen, Prof. Girish Bose of Bangabasi College and Nirod Mullick of Wellington Square, stood surety for Sri Aurobindo.⁴⁰

Previous to the launching of this prosecution, Sri Aurobindo had confined himself to writing and holding the reins of leadership from behind the scenes, and had not cared to advertise himself or put forward his personality. As he wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy two or three decades later:

I was never ardent about fame even in my political days; I preferred to remain behind the curtain, push people without their knowing it, and get things done. It was the confounded British Government that spoilt my game by prosecuting me and forcing me to be publicly known as a 'leader'.⁴¹

Thanks to the bungling of the British Government in India, Sri Aurobindo's name was overnight on the lips of a whole people. The semi-mystery of the authorship of the series of challengingly and coruscatingly beautiful and brilliant *Bande Mataram* articles was now wholly cleared up at last. Wires flashed, messages were splashed, and appreciations, congratulations, animated appraisals, all lighted up the pages of the national press. The *Madras Standard* wrote as follows:

⁴⁰ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 18 August 1907.

⁴¹ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me* (Jaico Edition, 1964), p. 34.

Perhaps, few outside Bengal have heard of Mr. Aurobindo Ghose, so much so that even the London *Times* has persisted in saying that none but Mr. Bepin Chandra Pal could be the author of the able articles appearing in the *Bande Mataram*.... In the history of press prosecutions in this country, we have not come across a man who has been more conspicuous by reason of his ability and force of character.

The *Indian Patriot* wrote that millions of his countrymen were at that moment doing homage to Sri Aurobindo's genius and "pronouncing his name with reverence and gratitude", and added:

Mr. Aurobindo Ghose is no notoriety hunter, is no demagogue who wants to become prominent by courting conviction for sedition. A man of very fine culture, his is a lovable nature; merry, sparkling with wit and humour, ready in refined repartee, he is one of those men to be in whose company is a joy and behind whose exterior is a steadily growing fire of unseen devotion to a cause.

And the *Mahratta* (Tilak's paper) succinctly declared: "Who knows but what is sedition today may be divine truth tomorrow? Mr. Aurobindo Ghose is a sweet soul".

Likewise, messages poured upon Sri Aurobindo. Most celebrated of all was Rabindranath Tagore's poem in Bengali which first appeared in the *Bande Mataram* of 8 September 1907, and the following lines are from an English rendering by Kshitish Chandra Sen:

O friend, my country's friend, O voice incarnate, free,
Of India's soul! No soft renown doth crown thy lot,
Nor pelf or careless comfort is for thee...
...O Victory and Hail!

Where is the coward who will shed tears today, or wail
 Or quake in fear? And who'll belittle truth to seek
 His own small safety? Where's the spineless creature

weak

Who will not in thy pain his strength and courage
 find?...

The fiery messenger that with the lamp of God
 Hath come — where is the king who can with chain
 or rod

Chastise him? Chains that were to bind salute his feet,
 And prisons greet him as their guest with welcome
 sweet...

...And so today I hear

The ocean's restless roar borne by the stormy wind,
 The impetuous fountain's dance riotous, swift and
 blind

Bursting its rocky cage, — the voice of thunder deep
 Awakening, like a clarion call, the clouds asleep.
 Amid this song triumphant, vast, that encircles me,
 Rabindranath,

O Aurobindo,

bows to thee.⁴²

The students of the Baroda College — his own students of but yesterday — sent this message: "We the students, past and present, of the Baroda College, in a meeting assembled, convey our warmest sympathy to our late Vice-Principal Mr. Ghose in his present trouble". And a contributor to the *Indian Patriot*, who signed himself "A.S.M.", asseverated in the course of his eulogy: "Slaves of ease and security, the butterflies of the hour look small and pitiable by his side".

The prosecution against the *Bande Mataram* and its

⁴² *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1944, pp 2-3.

supposed editor. Sri Aurobindo Ghose, pursued a strange career. Exasperated, frightened, almost maddened, the Government were after Sri Aurobindo: his sinister hand was seen everywhere — in the *Yugantar*, in *Sandhya*, and of course in the *Bande Mataram*. And how extensive were the tentacles that shot out of these “organs of public opinion”! and how uncannily they sought out converts or victims — who became critics and enemies of the bureaucracy — everywhere, even outside Bengal! And the man was so elusive, so mercurial, so diabolically clever: yet he seemed to be an etheric presence, everywhere, everywhere, yet nowhere precisely to be located and entrapped. But there were means and means, there were agents and agents, there were complicated three-tier nets to catch even the most slippery fish! First warnings were issued to the *Yugantar* (on 7 June 1907) and the *Bande Mataram* (on 8 June) that, if they didn’t learn to behave better, police action might ensue against them. After a decent interval, the *Yugantar* Office was searched on 3 July, and Bhupendranath Datta (instead of prudently trying to save his own neck) declared that he was the editor, courted arrest, and by refusing to offer defence (why should he, as a revolutionary, take cognizance of an alien court?) secured a year’s jail sentence. And the manager, — that was Abinash Bhattacharya; he had to be acquitted, for nothing could be proved against him. On 30 July, it was the turn of the Office of the *Bande Mataram* to be searched, and on 16 August the warrant for Sri Aurobindo’s arrest was issued. But he wouldn’t try to evade arrest; on the contrary, he went himself to the police court and asked to be arrested. Was he the editor of the *Bande Mataram*? No. Was he the printer?

No, again. A stalemate! Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya — another great evangelist of Nationalism who had referred to Sri Aurobindo as *Aurobindo, the lotus of immaculate whiteness, the hundred-petalled lotus in full bloom in India's Manasarovar* — was arrested as the editor of *Sandhya* on 31 August, but he was to trick the authorities and die, after a short illness, in the Campbell Hospital before the case against him could be concluded. Who, then, was most likely to throw light on the still obscure editor of the *Bande Mataram*? Bepin Pal, of course — the founder of the paper! So he was put on the witness box. Hadn't he severed his connection with the paper? Wasn't he the more likely therefore to squeal a little? But all calculations went wrong. Bepin Pal refused to name Sri Aurobindo as the editor of the paper. *Et tu Brute!* Pal was promptly sentenced to six months' simple imprisonment.⁴³ Commenting on the verdict, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Bande Mataram* of 12 September that Pal had been awarded "the maximum penalty permitted by the law for the crime of possessing a conscience". The issue had been whether Pal should obey the letter of the law requiring him to give evidence or whether he should rather obey (as many like Antigone had done) "the imperative command of his conscience (which was) a more sacred and binding law than the Penal Code". But Pal and the country alike only stood to gain from his conviction:

The country will not suffer by the incarceration of this great orator and writer, this spokesman and

⁴³ Sir Andrew Fraser the Lt. Governor wrote to Minto on 12 September: "We cannot catch him (Pal) for his speech; but an Indian Magistrate has given him six months for silence!" (Quoted from the Minto Papers in M.N. Das's *India under Morley and Minto*, p. 135).

prophet of Nationalism, nor will Bepin Chandra himself suffer by it. He has arisen ten times as high as he was before in the estimation of his countrymen.... He will come out of prison with his power and influence doubled, and Nationalism has already become the stronger for his self-immolation. Posterity will judge between him and the petty tribunal which has treated his honourable scruples as a crime.

Indeed, the Government had made a laughing-stock of themselves by instituting proceedings against Sri Aurobindo. "There would have been some meaning in the case", the *Punjabee* wrote, "if proceedings had been taken against the paper (the *Bande Mataram*) for any of its editorial writings which had given it a speciality among Indian newspapers"; but the flimsy ground — that the paper had reproduced some articles (in translation) from another paper — on which the prosecution chose to stand proved very soapy indeed. It was in vain that the Prosecution Counsel had thundered: "I do not care whether Sri Aurobindo was editor or not. I say he is the paper itself!" Mr. Chuckerburtt, the Defence Counsel, had no difficulty in drawing home the point that Sri Aurobindo was not really responsible for the publication of the articles to which exception had been taken. Incidentally, Mr. Chuckerburtt revealed the fact that, during a period of eight or nine months, Sri Aurobindo had received only fifty rupees for his contributions to the *Bande Mataram*!

At last, the Chief Presidency Magistrate Mr. Kingsford delivered judgement, acquitting Sri Aurobindo, and giving it as his considered opinion that "the general tone of the *Bande Mataram* is not seditious". Thus, as the paper

wrote editorially on 25 September 1907, the prosecution that had "commenced with a flourish of trumpets" ended merely "in the most complete and dismal fiasco such as no Indian Government has ever had to experience before in a sedition case". What, after all, had been the head and front of the *Bande Mataram's* offence against the Government. Only this,—it had attacked the existing system of Government and advocated a radical and revolutionary change "on grounds of historical experience, the first principles of politics and the necessity of national self-preservation". But the Government had gone about witch-hunting, and had sought by any means whatsoever to incriminate Sri Aurobindo and consign him to the dungeon. They had even clutched at the straw of the obscure Anukul Mukherjee's testimony, but Anukul had broken down in cross-examination. Even in that extremity, the Government would not see reason but pressed for a verdict, but the Magistrate could not oblige them. And if it all ended as a boomerang to the bureaucracy, they had only themselves to blame. This, then, was the way the trial ended, not with a bang (as Government had expected) — but a whimper!

After the acquittal, Rabindranath came to congratulate Sri Aurobindo, and said ironically: "What! you have deceived us!" And Sri Aurobindo seems to have answered with a smile. "Not for long will you have to wait!" But the story is not without its anticlimax. Magisterial wrath required a prey and found an easy victim in Apurva Bose, the printer of the *Bande Mataram*. Thus, "only an unfortunate Printer who knew no English and had no notion what all the pother was about was sent to prison for a few months to vindicate the much-damaged majesty

of the almighty bureaucracy".⁴⁴ Thou hast conquered, indeed, O Bureaucracy!

As an epilogue to the tragi-comedy, there was a minor skirmish between the David-like *Bande Mataram* and the Goliath-sized *Statesman* regarding the fate of the "poor" printer sentenced to three months' imprisonment, the nuances of magisterial ethics and the virtues of journalistic anonymity. On every count, Sri Aurobindo was able deftly to turn the tables against his antagonist of the *Statesman* (*alias* the "Friend" of India!) in two articles that appeared in the issue of 28 September 1907. One or two sentences may be extracted here:

The bureaucracy has armed itself with such liberal powers of repression that a journalist attacking it is like a man with no better weapon than a pebble assailing a Goliath panoplied from head to foot, armed with a repeating rifle and supported by howitzers and maxim guns. For a backer of the giant to complain because the unarmed assailant throws his pebble from behind a bush or wall is, to say the least of it, a trifle incongruous.

As for the "poor" printer, even had somebody come forward as the editor (as Bhupendranath had done for the *Yugantar*), "the printer would still have been liable under the statute and got his three months". And in the article entitled "Chowringhee and Anonymous Journalism", Sri Aurobindo put the record straight about certain facts in the history of British journalism, and concluded devastatingly with a touch of the sardonic as follows:

If the *Statesman* will consider these facts, it will

⁴⁴ *Bande Mataram*, 25 September 1907

realise that the mere possession of a rotary machine does not of itself make one an authority either on the history or on the ethics of journalism.

The laurels were with David, as always — not with Goliath.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE NATION'S PACE-MAKER

I

We saw that one of the developments that helped Sri Aurobindo to decide to leave the Baroda service for good and take the plunge into Bengal politics was the offer of the Principalship of the new National College at Calcutta. The college was started early in August 1906, and Sri Aurobindo probably began his work there on 15 August, his birthday. On the organisation side, there was Satis Chandra Mukherjee — already associated with the Dawn Society and the National Council of Education — as Superintendent, and among the other teachers was Radhakumud Mukherjee. Sri Aurobindo had on his hands the *Bande Mataram* too, besides his preoccupations with the Nationalist party and the secret Revolutionary party. He had to do his share of political touring also, an exhausting affair although often exhilarating as well. There was the resulting breakdown in his health, which made it necessary for him to spend three or four months at his grandfather's place in Deoghar, except for brief spells in Calcutta or trips to centres like Khulna. He had accordingly to take leave from the National College again and again, and the management of the college was almost wholly relegated to Satis Mukherjee.

On his return to India and during the years of his Baroda experience, Sri Aurobindo had found the British system of education “disgusting .. it tended to dull and impoverish and tie up the naturally quick and brilliant

and supple Indian intelligence, to teach it bad intellectual habits and spoil by narrow information and mechanical instruction its originality and productivity".¹ The adventure of starting the National College at Calcutta and other schools elsewhere evoked considerable enthusiasm at first, and the movement seemed to spread. The Risley Circular and the attempt to insulate Government and aided educational institutions from the breath of freedom and the breezes of Nationalism would, it was hoped, give a further fillip to national education. When Sir Bampfylde Fuller, as Lieutenant-Governor of East Bengal, had tried to disaffiliate the Serajunge schools for the crime of their teachers and pupils taking part in politics, Lord Minto's Government had disallowed the move and driven the Lieutenant-Governor to resign in a huff and get back to England. But with the Risley Circular, "the same Government and the same Lord Minto" began "out-Fullering Fuller" and flourishing the Damocles' Sword of disaffiliation over *all* schools and colleges, and not only over the two Serajunge schools. On 28 May 1907, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Bande Mataram* that what the Government seemed to object to was not mechanical learning but dynamic practice:

They do not care very much if certain academic ideas of liberalism or nationalism are imparted to the young by their teachers, but they desire to stop the active habit of patriotism in the young; for they well know that a mere intellectual habit untranslated into action is of no value in after life. The Japanese when they teach Bushido to their boys do not rest content with lectures or a moral catechism; they make them practise Bushido and

¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 57

govern every thought and action of their life by the Bushido ideal. This is the only way of inculcating a quality into a nation, by instilling it practically into the minds of its youth at school and college until it becomes an ingrained, inherent, inherited national quality.

The proper way to meet the challenge of the Risley Circular would be to end all reliance on the Government college or school, but the establishment of a college here or a dozen schools at different centres — and that was all that could be done by the middle of 1907 — was “not a sufficient record of work for a movement nationally recognised and adopted.”² Writing on 7 June, again, Sri Aurobindo said that “a general defiance of the Circular”, that and that alone would make the provisions of the Circular unworkable:

What India needs specially at this moment is the aggressive virtues, the spirit of soaring idealism, bold creation, fearless resistance, courageous attack of the passive *tamasic* spirit of inertia.... We would apply to the present situation the vigorous motto of Danton that what we need, what we should learn above all things is to dare and again to dare and still to dare.... National education is by no means impracticable or even difficult, it needs nothing but a resolute enthusiasm in the country and the courage to take a leap into the unknown. This courage is common in individuals but not in nations, least of all in subject nations; and yet when the fire is lit, it is perhaps subject nations more than any other which are found ready to take the leap.

² *Bande Mataram*, 29 May 1907.

In an article in the issue of 8 July, Sri Aurobindo succinctly stated yet once more the case against Government education:

It extends to a limited few and fails to inspire even them with any divine wonderment, the curiosity to know or the passion to leave the world better than they have found it by a single act or thought. Imparted with the predetermined purpose of reconciling the mind of its recipient with the order of things as they are, it has necessarily culminated in the production of a monstrous species whose object in acquiring knowledge cannot reach beyond the vision of mere luxurious animal life, who have been content with merely thinking of and describing the incident of their political slavery in the language of freedom learned from the noble literature of England, and then imagining themselves free; who have been content with the mere explanations their text-books give of their country's economic condition, content furthermore with their life of mere external conformity to ancient customs which they have ceased to have faith in, with the daily lies of their life, with the thousand and one defects, evils and insincerities of the disorganised society around them which they have not the moral force to reorganise. This passive life of acquiescence in things that be, lived by the average English-educated Indian, is the most effective piece of destructive criticism on the education given by the Indian Government.

It followed therefore, as night followed day and day followed night, that the individual and society in India

couldn't be transformed "till you have thoroughly purged and purified his thoughts and aspirations by giving him free and impartial education in the place of the loyalty-ridden instruction with the motto of *status quo* fastened round its neck".

In a series of articles contributed two years later to the *Karmayogin*, Sri Aurobindo discussed the problem of education in rather greater detail and almost outlined a philosophy of National education for India. Modern Indian education, being an absurd copy and even a vulgarisation of the British model, had compelled us to barter away our ancient heritage for the proverbial mess of pottage, this education had debased us, and all but destroyed us. The clue to reform should lie in reviving, as far as might be possible, the authentic in our ancient education:

What was the secret of that gigantic intellectuality, spirituality and superhuman moral force which we see pulsating in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, in the ancient philosophy, in the supreme poetry, art, sculpture and architecture of India? What was at the basis of the incomparable public works and engineering achievements, the opulent and exquisite industries, the great triumphs of science, scholarship, jurisprudence, logic, metaphysics, the unique social structure? What supported the heroism and self-abandonment of the Kshatriya, the Sikh and the Rajput, the unconquerable national vitality and endurance? What was it that stood behind that civilisation second to none, in the massiveness of its outlines or the perfection of its details? Without a great and a unique discipline involving a perfect

education of soul and mind, a result so immense and persistent would have been impossible.³

There were the *ashramas*, of course, and there were also the ancient universities, like those of Nalanda and Takshasila, Vallabhi and Vikramsila, Ujjaini and Kanchipuram, Amaravati and Odantapuri; but were not these ashramas and universities themselves reared on a seminal principle? Where did the ancients locate and how did they build the reservoir of vital energy that alone could have upheld those stupendous superstructures in the realms of Matter, Thought and Spirit?

Sri Aurobindo thought that the clue to the whole secret lay in the practice of *brahmacharya*, so widely prevalent in those early days of pristine Hindu culture. Brahmacharya sought to "raise up the physical to the spiritual"; it gradually perfected the instruments of knowledge; it led to the heightening and ultimate perfection of the *sattwic* elements in human nature; it created, as it were, an infallible engine of universal knowledge within. But Sri Aurobindo was also careful to add that such a feat of mobilisation and perfect deployment of one's faculties was possible "only to the *yogin* by the successful prosecution of the discipline of *yoga*".⁴ Brahmacharya was the starting-point, but yoga was the means to the finality of fulfilment. Between these two poles did the ancient Hindus raise their systems of knowledge, their methods of education and their experiments in civilisation.

And yet Sri Aurobindo did not say that the old Brahmacharya-Yoga axis could be reproduced in all its details in twentieth century India. He contented himself, on the other hand, with setting forth the "nature and psychological ideas of the old system" so that we might

³ *The Brain of India* (1955 Edition), pp. 9-10.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 20.

consider the possibility of their adoption in a modified form to suit current conditions, or — better still — of their further refinement and improvement on the basis of “a still deeper psychology and a still more effective discipline”.⁵ The system in vogue called upon the student to learn through a foreign medium “a variety of alien and unfamiliar subjects”. The arrangement being unnatural, there resulted “the disuse of judgement, observation, comprehension and creation, and the exclusive reliance on the deteriorating relics of the ancient Indian memory”.⁶ And, finally, odds and ends of information passed for Knowledge, and wisdom and creative intelligence were lost in this fog of pseudo-knowledge.

What National education, in its primary inspiration, aimed at doing was to employ the mother-tongue wherever possible, restore “the use of the disused intellectual functions”, and provide for “a richer and more real equipment of information, of the substance of knowledge and the materials for creation”.⁷ Having made such a diagnosis of the evils of the Government education and entertained such high hopes from the new National education, it was hardly to be wondered at that Sri Aurobindo was not altogether satisfied with the actual functioning of the National College and the other schools that had come into existence in the first flush of the people’s enthusiasm. These “national” institutions were not numerous enough, they had not really cut themselves free from the shackles of the old system, they had not adequate enough financial support, they had not teachers enough with the necessary sense of dedication or driving force, and they had not the requisite dynamism to dare and fare forward regardless of danger and difficulty. As Sri Aurobindo later

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 27. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 25. ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 25.

recapitulated the causes of the failure of the movement:

...partly because it had to deal with minds already vitiated by the old system and not often with the best even of these, because its teachers had themselves seldom a perfect grasp of the requirements of the new system, and because its controllers and directors were men of the old school who clung to familiar shibboleths and disastrous delusions.... While calling itself national, it neglected the very foundation of the great achievement of our forefathers and especially the perfection of the instrument of knowledge.⁸

And on a later occasion still:

National Education languished because the collective force has been withdrawn from it.... The National Council of Education, as it is at present composed, has convicted itself of entire incapacity whether to grasp the meaning of the movement or to preserve or create the conditions of its success. To the majority of members, it is merely an interesting academical experiment ... To others the only valuable part of it is the technical instruction given in its workshops. The two or three who at all regard it as part of a great national movement, are unnerved by fear, scepticism and distrust and, by introducing the principles of Chanakya into its public policy, are depriving it of the first condition of its continued existence.⁹

It wasn't just the label "National" but the reality of the power and the glory evoked by the word: it wasn't a superficial tinkering with the curriculum or a half-hearted change in the content and mode of education but a new

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 25-6 ⁹ *The Karmayogin*, 1 January 1910

perception of the ends and a bold new forging of the required means: it wasn't merely a vocational "bias" or a practical "turn" but patriotism itself as the vocation and service of the Mother as the decisive turn in life — such was National education as Sri Aurobindo had visualised it, but the National College at Calcutta and the other National Schools that had sprung up in Bengal seemed incapable of rising to the heights of striving expected of them. While the new education was to have been an integral part of the great movement of national resurgence and patriotic upsurge, by dwindling too readily into anaemic reformism or even half-headed conformism it lost its initial momentum and transforming power and failed to enthuse students and teachers alike. And Sri Aurobindo certainly didn't mince matters when he said:

It is foolish to expect men to make great sacrifices while discouraging their hopes and enthusiasm. It is not intellectual recognition of duty that compels sustained self-sacrifice in masses of men; it is hope, it is the lofty ardour of a great cause, it is the enthusiasm of a noble and courageous effort.¹⁰

But in the early morning glory of the National College — in August 1906 and the months following — all was resplendent hope and towering expectation. And Sri Aurobindo came to the class-room trailing clouds of glory — he was an inspiring teacher — his was a noble presence. A former pupil of the National College, Balaji Dev Sharma has thus reminisced about the well-beloved and universally respected Sri Aurobindo: "He was clad in a shirt and a *chaddar*.... I seem to recall his eyes, which were withdrawn from the outer world and concentrated on the inner spaces of his consciousness".¹¹

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Quoted in *Bulletin* (XVI. 3), August 1964, p. 110

Addressing teachers and students together on one occasion, Sri Aurobindo had said that it was only when the Western nations' titanic power for organisation and practical work was united with the enfranchising, harmonising and creative spirituality of India, only then could our national character "evolve such a type as would be incomparable in the world". But alas! the Indian sensibility was prone to be sicklied over with the pale cast of *tamas*; that had to change — an inrush of primordial revitalising energy had to be brought about — and the music of a creative new harmony had to emerge from the lyre that the awakened Mother had taken in her hand.

A former colleague at the National College, Pramathanath Mukhopadhyaya (later Swami Pratyagatmananda) has also recorded his memories of those times:

When he started his work in the heaving politics of Bengal, it was the blazing, fiery aspect of Rudra that stood out in front. But those who associated with him in the National College saw his serene figure, glowing with a mellow lustre. These two aspects were fused into one in Sri Aurobindo as in the third eye of Shiva.¹²

Once at a meeting of the college staff, Sri Aurobindo took the chair, "his body framed in august silence"; the meeting discussed whether the Bankim Day should not be included among the "days of national festival", and the support to the proposal that came from Sri Aurobindo "had the benign vibrant blare of the trumpet of Shiva". On the Saraswati Puja day, again, Sri Aurobindo sat with the others in the courtyard, "silent and immobile, like Shiva in trance", and on that day, in a flash of in-

¹² *ibid*, (XVIII. 1), February 1966, pp. 98, 100

tuition, Pramathanath saw Sri Aurobindo, not merely as a Jnana Yogi or Karma Yogi, "but as a Purna Yogi, lapped in the Yogic sleep of deep meditation".¹³ This was no learned colleague merely, this was an immaculate and ineluctable Power that had assumed a human form, this was a manifestation, a "resplendent divinity", this was a nectarean Promise and the prelude to the coming Fulfilment.

When the Government decided to prosecute Sri Aurobindo on account of his supposed editorship of the *Bande Mataram*, he resigned his Principalship of the National College so as not to embarrass the authorities by his continued association with the institution. But he was the idol of the students still, more so now than even before, and they organised a meeting on 21 August to record their regret at his resignation and express their sympathy with him in his "present troubles". On 22 August another meeting of the students and teachers was called, and on being requested to speak, Sri Aurobindo made a brief but moving speech, admirably pointed to the occasion but also carrying its accents of persuasion and authority to all time. What sort of advice was he to give, when "in these days... young men can very often give better advice than we older people can give"? They had referred to his "troubles":

I don't know whether I should call them troubles at all, for the experience that I am going to undergo was long foreseen as inevitable in the discharge of the mission that I have taken up from my childhood, and I am approaching it without regret.

There would be no cause for regret if he could be as-

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 100.

sured that the rising generation would carry on his work when he was removed from the field. The respect shown to him was really due "to the Mother in me", for whatever he had been able to do — whatever he had endured and suffered — had been for the Mother's sake alone. Then came the piece of "advice":

The only piece of advice that I can give you now is — carry on the work, the mission, for which this college was created.... When we established this college and left other occupations, other chances of life, to devote our lives to this institution, we did so because we hoped to see in it the foundation, the nucleus of a nation, of the new India which is to begin its career after this night of sorrow and trouble, on that day of glory and greatness when India will work for the world. What we want here is not merely to give you a little information, not merely to open to you careers for earning a livelihood, but to build up sons for the Motherland, to work and to suffer for her.¹⁴

Suddenly the pitch is raised, the tone is heightened, the words are charged with a Messianic force, and the rhythm reverberates and carries its burden of urgency far, far beyond the hall, far beyond the Bengal of 1907, and it is almost as though the words are addressed to us:

There are times in a nation's history when Providence places before it one work, one aim, to which everything else, however high and noble in itself, has to be sacrificed. Such a time has now arrived for our Motherland when nothing is dearer than her service, when everything else is to be directed to

¹⁴ *Speeches* (1952 Edition), pp 2-3

that end. If you will study, study for her sake; train yourself body and mind and soul for her service. You will earn your living that you may live for her sake. You will go abroad to foreign lands that you may bring back knowledge with which you may do service to her. Work that she may prosper. Suffer that she may rejoice. All is contained in that one single advice.¹⁵

A succession of words is like a string of numbers whose value depends on the position of the decimal point, and the power of words likewise depends on the man who speaks them. Sri Aurobindo's exhortation powerfully affected his audience because *he* (Rudra-Shiva) was the speaker, and Rudra's action had preceded Shiva's words. National service was a mission Sri Aurobindo had assumed since childhood, he had known all along that there would be danger, and the possibility of arrest and imprisonment and other tribulations. "I am nothing, what I have done is nothing"; but the son of the Mother — the Mother in him — was everything! Leadership was a form of service, and there was unending scope for service. The college was really a school for training in such national service. The college community was the nucleus of the New India — the India who would redeem herself and work for the whole world. By losing themselves in the adoration and service of the Mother, they would experience a great accession of strength in them and in the Mother, and that would be the higher fulfilment. "When in future I shall look upon your career of glorious activity", Sri Aurobindo concluded, "I may have the pride of remembering that I did something to prepare and begin it".

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 4.

After his acquittal in the *Bande Mataram* case, Sri Aurobindo resumed his professorship — though not the Principalship — but his increasing involvement in politics which had become inevitable because of the blaze of publicity during the prosecution compelled him to give less and less time to the college. At last, during the Alipur case following the Muzzaferpore outrage on 30 April 1908, on the suggestion of the college authorities, Sri Aurobindo finally severed his connection with it. The National College thus lost its principal light-giver, its soul, and settled down to a pedestrian existence, very much like most other educational institutions in the country. In the fulness of time — after national Independence — the college duly attained its apotheosis as the Jadhavpur University.

II

While the *Bande Mataram* case was going on, there appeared in the paper three editorial articles from Sri Aurobindo's pen in which he joined issue with Mr. N. N. Ghose of the *Indian Nation* on the subject of nationality and sovereignty in the Indian context. Answering a question posed by himself — What are the elements of Sovereignty? — Sri Aurobindo wrote in the first of the three articles:

We answer that there are certain essential conditions, geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain political conditions which enable the impulse to realise itself in an organised government expres-

sing the nationality and perpetuating its single and united existence.¹⁶

Sri Aurobindo further emphatically maintained that these conditions were indeed present in India. In reply to Mr N. N. Ghose's contention that the mixture of races was an insuperable obstacle in the way of national unity, Sri Aurobindo resorted to *reductio ad absurdum*.

One might just as well say that different chemical elements cannot combine into a single substance as that different races cannot combine into a single nation.¹⁷

In another article, written for but not actually published in the *Bande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo went — as he often did — to the very root of the matter and explained in vivid figurative language the *raison d'être* of Indian patriotism:

...the pride in the past, the pain of our present, the passion for the future are its (*i.e.*, patriotism's) trunk and branches. Self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, great service, high endurance for the country, are its fruits. And the sap that keeps it alive is the realisation of the motherhood of God in the country, the vision of the Mother, the perpetual contemplation, adoration and service of the Mother.¹⁸

There would be no "problem" of Indian unity to solve if only Indians could learn to realise themselves, not in the stifling burrow or groove of a section or segment of the community or the country, but in the infinite bounty of

¹⁶ *Bande Mataram* (Weekly), 18 August 1907.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 1 September 1907. In the issue of 29 November, Sri Aurobindo asked: "Has not Sidgwick established it beyond any shadow of doubt that diversity of race, language and religion does not stand in the way of forming a nation?"

¹⁸ Printed in *Selections from the Bande Mataram* (Benares, 1922).

the Mother, the total strength of the beloved Mother who was Bhavani Bharati at the same time. In another article, Sri Aurobindo differentiated between a false façade of unity that was meaningless and the true unity that alone had the strength and will to dare and achieve. The cry for unity raised in season and out of season was but a "cant phrase", because the people who usually used it wished merely to discourage "independence in thought and progressiveness in action". Such double-talk was "a fosterer of falsehood" and could only encourage "cowardice and insincerity". And it was wrong to go about pleading for a patch-work unity, an anyhow-and-somehow kind of "unity" that involved the sacrifice of honest opinion, principle and conscientious action. The pseudo-unity-mongers seemed to say:

Be your views what they may, suppress them, for they will spoil our unity; swallow your principles, they will spoil our unity, do not battle for what you think to be the right, it will spoil our unity; leave necessary things undone, for the attempt to do them will spoil our unity: this is the cry.

A "dead and lifeless unity" was but the index of national degradation; a living unity would, on the other hand, be the "index of national greatness" What sort of "unity" — political unity — could be forged between the Loyalists, the Moderates and the Nationalists? Nor was it historically true that without "flawless unity within" nations hadn't liberated themselves and done great deeds:

On the contrary, when a nation is living at high pressure and feelings are at white heat, opinions and actions are bound to diverge far more strongly than at other times. In the strenuous times before the American War of Independence, the colony was

divided into a powerful minority who were wholly for England, a great hesitating majority who were eager for internal autonomy but unwilling to use extreme methods, and a small but vigorous minority of extremists, with men like John Adams at their head, who pushed the country into revolt and created a nation. The history of the Italian nation tells the same story.

Even in Japan, it was when the issue between the Moderate Shogun party and the Extremist Mikado party was settled that the country's sensational regeneration became possible. Of course, as distinct from paper-unity or hypocritical platform-unity, there was the mystique of true national unity, which was "the unity of self-dedication to the country, when the liberty and the greatness of our motherland is the paramount consideration to which all others must be subordinated".¹⁹

In several other contributions too, nationalism, national unity, the philosophy of patriotism, the Kshatriya spirit, and politics and spirituality come under scrutiny, and these essays and the obiter dicta scattered in the rest invite the critical attention of students of political science generally and of Indian political thought in particular.²⁰ But there is room here only for random glances at a few of these sparks from Sri Aurobindo's well-worked anvil of the *Bande Mataram* days. The heat of political controversy sparked off many of these essays, yet the sparks leapt from the forge and anvil of a great

¹⁹ *Bande Mataram*, 23 October 1907.

²⁰ The reader is referred to V. P. Varma's *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (1960), Karan Singh's *Prophet of Indian Nationalism: A Study of the Political Thought of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh 1893-1910* (1963, 1967) [and Haridas and Uma Mukherjee's *Sri Aurobindo's Political Thought 1893-1908* (1958)].

and unique aspiration to which Nationalism was a living religion offering infinite scope for mighty effort and glorious realisation. A reference was made earlier to the audacious simile elaborated by Sri Aurobindo in the essay on "The Life of Nationalism" to equate the growth of the national spirit in India with the different stages in the life of Krishna: and Nationalism was an *avatār*! — an *avatār* that had taken birth to redeem the Mother from the clutches of the demon, Foreign Rule. In another essay, "Sri Krishna and Autocracy", Sri Aurobindo went again to Krishna's life to draw a lesson in nation-building. The essay, however, begins rather unexpectedly with a glance at Brutus' killing of his friend Julius Caesar:

It was not in vain that Brutus polluted his hands with the blood of his own beloved comrade and exclaimed by way of palliating his sanguinary action, "As he was ambitious, I slew him". Ambition scorns humanity, believes that the world exists for serving him and him alone, and turns all abilities to questionable purposes.... Whoever does not delight in being one of the multitude and has no desire to share their joys and sorrows can hardly do any good to mankind....

And Krishna comes into the picture as the *avatār* who was also a man of the people. He was the nation-builder, not the builder of his own image; he made "overtures for peace" but took care to have some strength at his back.²¹ In another essay that appeared five days later, Sri Aurobindo once more underlined the religious dimension that politics had acquired:

The political strife has assumed a religious cha-

²¹ *Bande Mataram*, 25 November 1907

racter, and the question now before the people is whether India — the India of the holy Rishis, the India that gave birth to a Rama, a Krishna and a Buddha, the India of Shivaji and Guru Govinda — is destined for ever to lie prostrate at the proud feet of a conqueror.²²

And in a later essay, Sri Aurobindo affirmed that, "according to the Hindu idea of patriotism, none but those who look upon their Motherland as superior even to Heaven itself are patriots".²³ And how was one to reconcile with this ideal of patriotism the notion of colonial self-government? Varieties of people there might be in a country so extensive as India, there might be a diversity of interests, rival groups and temperaments and enthusiasms; but all could coalesce nevertheless on a great common endeavour that was a matter of life and death to everybody. Sri Aurobindo saw no lack of vitality in the people, the proletariat, who were perhaps the unawakened giant, still a giant, alive, and now waking up at last; it was from the so-called educated classes that vitality seemed to have been drained away:

The spirit that rose against the Colonisation Bill in the Punjab and prevented its passing into law, the spirit that has manifested itself in the Bengal Boycott, the spirit that has revolted against white insolence in the Transvaal is the spirit of the people....²⁴

Certain "leaders", some out of ignorance and others out of mischief, had been extolling a life of passivity, equating passivity with spirituality and rating spirituality as something far superior to the rough and tumble of

²² *ibid.*, 30 November 1907.

²³ *ibid.*, 13 December 1907.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 27 November 1907

practical politics, — the net result of these intellectual gyrations being to confirm whole masses of men and women in a placid acceptance of the condition of slavery and a sinking into *tamas* unqualified and unrelieved. *Tamas* invited subjection, and subjection confirmed *tamas* as a settled condition. In a forthright article on "Politics and Spirituality", Sri Aurobindo said:

Subjection makes a people wholly *tāmasic*, a sort of physical, intellectual and moral palsy seizes them and keeps them down to a low level of being, they are like insects grovelling in the dust, and before they can be lifted up to the higher plane of *sattva*, they must pass through *raja*.²⁵

Did not the champions of the neo-spirituality (who were really the defenders of *tamas*) — did they not know, Sri Aurobindo asked, that Sri Chaitanya himself once defied the Kazi when he tried to prevent *Sankirtan* and in fact so overwhelmed the Muslim Magistrate that he not only cancelled his earlier order but himself joined the Assembly that evening? Peace, peace, certainly, but not the peace of somnolence, not the peace of the prison-house, not the peace of the grave. Anticipating one of the basic strands of his future spiritual philosophy, Sri Aurobindo concluded the essay with a masterly and memorable pronouncement.

Spiritual energy is not on this earth a thing apart but reposes and draws upon physical energies. Those who shrink from the supreme call of the present crisis when a powerful bureaucracy has marshalled its full forces to crush Nationalism in the land will show a defeat, not merely of courage, but of true spirituality. It was an ebb in the spiritual sentiment

²⁵ *ibid.*, 9 November 1907.

which resulted in a complete nervousness with Arjuna on the eve of the great battle of Kurukshetra, and one spiritual ideal worked out in the Gita is that, if you allow spiritual timidity to intervene between you and your duty, all spiritual possibility is gone... Those Hindus who give ungrudging audience to this unnational and unspiritual preaching of the denunciation of courageous resistance when there is occasion for it, are merely condemning themselves to the patient endurance of a life-long humiliation. Faith in the potential strength of our people is the basis of our national movement, and to realise that strength and energise it by taking every opportunity for unflinching courageous action is the only way in which the national movement can be pushed forward to the rapid and triumphant consummation which Asia needs and India demands.

In one of his other contributions, Sri Aurobindo recalled the words of the French thinker, Turgot, that the great enemy of progress was not error but indolence, obstinacy and the spirit of routine²⁶ — in a word, *tamas*. Like Danton's "No weakness!", Sri Aurobindo's "No *tamas*!" — reviving Swami Vivekananda's clarion-call — rang out, time and again, loud and peremptory; and Sri Aurobindo remarked with unconcealed bluntness that politics was for the *kshatriya* in spirit, for not otherwise could freedom and greatness be won or retained.²⁷

While it is no doubt these large declarations, these weighty generalisations, these luminous enunciations of policy and principle that raise Sri Aurobindo's contributions to the *Bande Mataram* to the level of political

²⁶ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 24 November 1907.

²⁷ *Bande Mataram*, 4 December 1907.

literature, there are other attractions too — brilliant fire-works, exhibitions of sword-play, exercises in political jousting — and it is thanks to these that some of Sri Aurobindo's victims are ever likely to be remembered at all. Who would remember Mr. N. N. Ghose today except for Sri Aurobindo's taking some notice of him, as for example in:

Men of all parties, except the party of Mr. N. N. Ghose which, as it consists of only one man, need not concern us...²⁸

We quite admit that it is difficult to understand the mystic wisdom of a sage (Mr. Ghose) who asserts that the soundness of his premises has nothing to do with the soundness of his conclusions...²⁹ Or who could have saved Mr. Asanuddin Ahmed from complete oblivion had not Sri Aurobindo written about "The Khulna Comedy":

Mr. Asanuddin Ahmed is a very distinguished man. The greatest and most successful achievement of his life was to be a fellow-collegian of Lord Curzon. But he has other sufficiently respectable, if less gorgeous, claims to distinction... His mastery over figures is so great that Arithmetic is his slave and not his master.... His triumphant dealings with logic were admirably exemplified by the original syllogism which he presented to the startled organisers of the District Conference: "I, Asanuddin, am the District Magistrate; the District Magistrate is the representative of the district; ergo, I, Asanuddin am the one and only representative of the district..." Mr. Ahmed's English is the delight of the judges of the High Court, who are believed to spend

²⁸ *ibid* , 7 June 1907 ²⁹ *ibid.*, (Weekly), 25 August 1907.

sleepless nights in trying to make out the meaning of his judgements.... The Khulna case has been from the point of view of Justice an undress rehearsal of the usual bureaucratic comedy, from the point of view of Mr. Asanuddin Ahmed it has been a brilliant exhibition of his superhuman power of acting folly and talking nonsense...³⁰

John Morley — critic and biographer of distinction, though an ineffective, if not cynical, Secretary of State for India — is almost skinned alive in the satirical portrait "In Praise of Honest John". Morley may have his niche in England's political and literary history, but this comic twitch to the portrait will perhaps be always remembered too. This is, of course, political journalism at its most outspoken and no holds are barred:

Mr. John Morley rises above the ordinary ruck of mortals in three very important respects; first, he is a literary man; secondly, he is a philosopher; thirdly, he is a politician.... He has not only doubled his parts, he has trebled them... he is a literary philosopher-politician. Now this is a superlative combination; God cannot better it and the devil does not want to. For if an ordinary man steals, he steals, and there are no more bones made about it.... But if a literary philosopher steals, he steals on the basis of the great and eternal verities and in the choicest English.... Oh yes, a literary philosopher-politician is the choicest work of God, — when he is not the most effective instrument in the hands of the Prince of Darkness....³¹

Like his own master, Gladstone, Morley was an opportunist too — and he had "served the devil in the name

³⁰ *ibid*, 20 July 1907. ³¹ *ibid.*, 18 November 1907.

of God with signal success on two occasions". First, when he championed the cause of the European financiers in Egypt, exploiters who made money out of the groans of people, the blood of patriots and the tears of widows and orphans; and second, when he tried, in the interests of British capital, to crush the resurgent life of India. As a political-cum-reasoning animal who was also a pre-eminently literary animal, Mr. Morley had made smart use of the phrase: "The anchor holds". On this Sri Aurobindo comments:

"It is true, gentlemen", says Mr. Morley, "that I am doing things which are neither liberal nor democratic; but, then, my anchor holds...." So might a clergyman detected in immorality explain himself to his parishioners.... So might Robespierre have justified himself for the Reign of Terror, "It is true, Frenchmen, that I have always condemned capital punishment as itself a crime, yet am judicially massacring my countrymen without pause or pity; but my anchor holds. Yes, Citizens, I dare to believe that my anchor holds". So argues Mr. Morley and all England applauds in a thousand newspapers and acquits him of political sin.

Another of Mr. Morley's choice concoctions was the "furcoat" phrase. In Canada, you needed a furcoat — but not in Egypt or India! It was just so with principles — what was applicable in one place mightn't be applicable elsewhere! Sri Aurobindo is aghast at this kind of logic:

It is difficult to know what inequity reasoning of this sort would not cover. "I thoroughly believe in the Ten Commandments", Caesar Borgia might have said in his full career of political poisonings and strangulations, "but they may do very well in

one country and age without applying at all to another. They suited Palestine, but mediaeval Italy is not Palestine. Principles are a matter of chronology and climate, and it would be highly unphilosophical and unpractical of me to be guided by them as if I were Christ or Moses.... Still I am a Christian and the nephew of a Pope, so my anchor holds, yes, my anchor holds”.

And, for a final illustration, there was the castigation of the whole class of Anglo-Indian administrators, both during their stay in India and after their return home. In India, they could forget they were Englishmen, and they could assume the god, affect his nod and seem to shake the spheres; but once back in England, alas, they found themselves misfits there:

...people refuse to mix with them, servants refuse to serve them, and hence retired Anglo-Indians have to live in their native country in special colonies of their own, away from the current of the nation's life. Their main talk is about the horses and carriages and the servants they had in India, the number of Indians they had gratuitously insulted, and the many clubs to which they had belonged.³²

As Sri Aurobindo saw it, the tragedy was that these administrators had behaved in India as if they were not Englishmen, as if they didn't belong to a country the purpose of whose history had been “the increasing realisation of its people's equality and freedom”. And, after all, the “great labouring class, the main mass of the people” had little or no interest in England's connection with India.³³ The mischief had been largely the handi-

³² *Bande Mataram*, 30 September 1907.

³³ And in 1947, it was a Labour Government, headed by Clement Attlee,

work of these administrators in India, unthinkable per-versions of what had once been Englishmen!

Need we be surprised now that all Anglo-India, all the higher eschelons of the bureaucracy, the British Government itself, all gnashed their teeth, fumed in impotent fury, and vowed that the culprit who, veiling himself behind editorial anonymity, could perpetrate such offences against decorum, throw spoonfuls of prussic acid about and blast carefully built-up reputations, should be silenced and silenced as soon as possible. As for the Moderate stalwarts, they experienced a vast unease: was it wise to hurl such unbecoming epithets at a friend of India like Mr. Morley? Was it linguistically prudent to call a spade a spade — and even treble spade it into the bargain? Was it altogether judicious to hit at the entire phalanx of the bureaucracy? The average Moderate leader began to feel that, if the march of such Extremism was not halted in time, the promised sugar candy of instalmental constitutional reforms might be withdrawn unceremoniously — and, pray, who would suffer in that unthinkable eventuality? Something resolute had to be done to prevent such a terrible catastrophe. On the other hand, the Nationalists knew that once the alien rulers ceased to be respected and feared, that must be the beginning of the end of alien despotism.

III

We have seen how Sri Aurobindo took a decisive part at the Benares Congress (1905) and even more at the Calcutta Congress (1906) and succeeded, while still keeping out of the platform and hence out of the head-
that conceded independence to India (and Pakistan) on 15 August.

lines as well, in getting the organisation to be, not "national" only in name, but also in some measure, alike in the tempo of its proceedings and in the substance and language of its resolutions, really "national" in its thinking and policy-making. The unanimity reached at Calcutta was at first accepted by the Indian press of all complexions with something like genuine relief, but it also provoked in the Anglo-Indian press "wild and hysteric shrieks of piercing harshness flying Morleyward".³⁴ However, some time after the session was over, the Moderates began to think that they had committed themselves too readily and a little too much, and the Nationalists thought that they had weak-kneedly acquiesced in too much dilution of their original four-point programme. A kind of journalistic and platform trench warfare started since the early months of the new year, and as the year advanced, the forays were more frequent and the engagements more bitter. One new development was that Government resorted to repression in real earnest, especially in Bengal and in the Punjab. Another development was the vague and vain talk of the Minto-Morley constitutional reforms that were said to be in a process of gestation. The sugar plum distantly and discreetly dangled before the Moderates made them a little lukewarm in their denunciation of repression, but for the Nationalists themselves the proposed reforms were only one more insult added to the long-standing injury of the nation's enslavement. The Government-tolerated hooliganism in East Bengal enraged the Nationalists, and the Risleigh Circular was like adding fury to the leaping fire of resentment against the bureaucracy. Where fierce repression, as in Bengal and in the Punjab, seemed to have

³⁴ *Bande Mataram*, 3 September 1907.

succeeded in extinguishing the flames of revolt, it had only driven it underground, ready to burst out again in redoubled fury:

Repression can never crush a force when it is once in operation, but to kill it is impossible. Conservation of energy is a law of nature, and she cannot be false to herself in the interests of the British bureaucracy. Energy changes for us, works in subtle and invisible ways, but is never destroyed.³⁵

In a notable article on "The Nationalist's Faith and Hope", Sri Aurobindo traced the history of the Nationalist party, discussed the grounds of its faith and hope, and concluded by throwing this challenge to the Government that seemed to be bent on a career of repression:

...do you feel confident enough that for every Nationalist that you hurry into prison, you will not call into life Nationalists by the hundred-thousand who will take the vow before their God to live and work for the day when the punishment of the Nationalist shall be impossible, when Nationalism shall be the only passport to glory, honour, worship, the only deliverance from death?³⁶

With the Moderates reforming their forces, the bureaucracy on the offensive, the hooligans on the rampage, many Nationalists dispirited by the wave of repression and many spirited away to prison and many more losing all hope in the normal methods of political agitation, it became Sri Aurobindo's crucial role to be the nation's pace-setter, to act the role of Krishna who buoyed up the drooping spirits of the Pandavas on the field of Kurukshetra, to foresee the developing destiny of the nation, to deploy the available forces (visible and invi-

³⁵ *ibid.*, 2 September 1907. ³⁶ *ibid.*, 3 September 1907.

sible), to argue and to harangue, to plan and to execute. The whole of him none of his associates knew, but at least after the *Bande Mataram* prosecution, it was general knowledge among the Moderates as well as the Loyalists that he was a power to be reckoned with and that every one of his moves was worth watching.

It was easy for the Moderate leaders — the Lion of Bombay and the seagreen incorruptible of Poona, the two sonorous Pandits of Allahabad, the great lawyers and constitutionalists of Calcutta and Madras, and the clever calculators and formula-hunters everywhere — to try to dismiss the Nationalists with a snigger, poohpooh their adolescent extremism, and commiserate with their self-invited troubles which however took the country nowhere. Leaders like Tilak and Lajpat Rai were formidable figures indeed, built on a heroic mould, yet even they weren't always quite a match for the plausible sophistries of the Moderates. Sri Aurobindo was thus needed to match iron by steel, meet sword by sharper sword, counter specious argument and hypothetical formulation by clear logic and reference to the indisputable facts of history or the quiddities of human nature. He had to be ready for every move, he needed every weapon in his armoury, and he had an endless call on his battery of wit, humour, satire, sarcasm, ridicule and invective. Between Calcutta (1906) and Surat (1907) was a journey and a struggle — and the *Bande Mataram* case was but a specially significant episode on the way — and all along the route Sri Aurobindo was the nation's pace-maker, upholder of the nation's honour and keeper of the nation's conscience.

At the Congress in December 1906, it had been decided that the next session should be held at Nagpur. A local Reception Committee was formed at Nagpur, a

predominantly Maharashtrian city and a Nationalist stronghold, and this Reception Committee elected an Executive Committee which had a Nationalist majority. Soon after, the Moderates unconstitutionally wanted to have a new Executive Committee elected. But when one secretary, Chitnavis, called a meeting of the Reception Committee for this purpose, another secretary, Dr. B. S. Moonje, would not allow the meeting to be held; and so a pandemonium resulted. The Moderates, having first started the trouble, now accused the Nationalists of rowdiness. Sri Aurobindo referred to this event in the *Bande Mataram* of 23 October ("The Nagpur Affair") and 29 October ("The Nagpur Imbroglio"). There had been a popular demonstration undoubtedly, but it was "absurd to make the Nationalist leaders in Nagpur responsible for the outburst. All that they did was to baffle a very discreditable attempt to defy all constitutional procedure and public decorum in the interests of party trickery, and in doing so they were entirely right".⁸⁷

The all-important issue, of course, was the election of the next Congress President. Nationalist opinion in India was unanimously in favour of Tilak. But for election, a three-fourths majority in the Reception Committee was required. If none could secure such a majority, the matter would rest with the All India Congress Committee. The Moderates' game was to prevent the election of Tilak and to shift the venue from Nagpur to a safer place like Madras or Surat, and have a worthy Moderate like Rash Behari Ghosh as President. In an article on 5 November, Sri Aurobindo adverted to the question of Tilak's presidentship. An unselfish and unassuming patriot, Tilak wasn't himself eager to be pushed into the Presi-

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 29 October 1907.

dentship; it was the Nationalist party that had put forward his name, and that for the best of reasons:

Mr. Tilak by his past career, his unqualified abilities and capacity for leadership, his splendid courage and self-sacrifice, his services to the cause and the disinterestedness and devotion with which he used his influence, is naturally the most prominent of the Nationalist leaders, and our party looks up to his experience, skill, cool acuteness and moral strength for guidance on great occasions like the Congress session....

The Nationalists or Radicalists wanted Tilak to be President because that would "break through this oligarchic ring and establish the true nature of the Congress as no machinery to be engineered by a few wealthy or successful proprietors, but a popular assembly in which the will of the people must prevail". Others had used the Congress as a springboard for senior Government appointments or nomination to Government Councils; but the Nationalists felt that "leadership in the Congress" must henceforth be "a post of danger and a position of service to people and it must depend on service done and suffering endured for the cause".³⁸ Even in 1906, the Nationalists had put up Tilak's candidature, but the Moderates had shied at Tilak because he had been convicted for sedition in the past and was anathema to the bureaucracy, but these were the very reasons that raised Tilak in the Radicals' eyes.

Three days later, on 8 November 1907, the *Bande Mataram* struck a more ominous note. The bureaucracy seemed determined to rally the Moderates and crush the Nationalists, and, what was much worse, Gokhale and Rash Behari Ghosh had made contemptuous references to

³⁸ *ibid.*, 5 November 1907.

the Nationalists in the Council Chamber. "They have betrayed", wrote Sri Aurobindo, "a sad ignorance of the Nationalist literature in the country, its manly and truthful ring, its patriotic fervour, its success in stimulating race-consciousness, its certain drift towards self-realisation, its clear logic, its historical insight, its spiritual inspiration". Taking his cue from Stephen Hopkins's words on the eve of the American Declaration of Independence and from Kossuth's to his Hungarian aristocratic compatriots, Sri Aurobindo concluded the article thus:

He (Kossuth) told them, "With you, if you choose; but without you, or against you, if it must be". We also say the same to all who threaten to desert us in such a critical hour.

During the next few days, things moved pretty fast. The All India Congress Committee met on 10 November at Pherozeshah Mehta's house in Bombay and decided to shift the venue from Nagpur to Surat. Rash Behari Ghosh was elected President of the coming session, and this was facilitated by Lajpat Rai's withdrawal from the contest. Failing Tilak, the Nationalists would have liked Lajpat Rai, just released from prison, to be President. But the die was cast anyhow, and all was set for the great confrontation at Surat. Perhaps Pherozeshah Mehta and his friends counted on the inveterate Moderates of Gujarat. Yet things might turn out quite differently, after all!³⁹

During his stay of about thirteen years at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo had had opportunities of gauging the potentialities of the Gujarati mind and character. He had friends and former pupils who were holding important positions in the public life of Gujarat. The *Bande Mataram* —

³⁹ *ibid*, 17 December 1907: article on "The Awakening of Gujarat"

the daily and weekly editions both — were read widely in Gujarat, and reprints from the paper had also been issued there, and these had enjoyed a tremendous vogue all over the country. It was thus with personal knowledge as well as with some intuition about the future that Sri Aurobindo wrote the following:

Gujarat was once part of the Rajput circle and her princes fought on equal terms with Mahmud of Ghazni. Her people form valuable and indispensable material for the building of the Indian nation. The *savoir faire*, the keen-witted ability and political instinct of her Brahmins, the thrift and industry of her merchants, the robust vigour and common-sense of her Patidars, the physique and soldierly qualities of her Kathis and Rajputs, the strong raw human material of her northern and southern hills, are so many elements of strength which Nationalism must seize and weld into a great national force.

As future events showed — the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India from South Africa, the founding of the Sabarmati Ashram, the launching of the non-cooperation movement, the Bardoli Satyagraha under Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's leadership — Sri Aurobindo had been prophetic in his assessment of Gujarat's role in the fight for national independence.

In the meantime, as if it was meant to be a dress rehearsal of the coming Congress session, the Nationalists and Moderates of Bengal clashed at Midnapore where the District Conference was held from 7 to 9 December 1907. The imprisonment of some of his principal co-workers in Bengal, the exile or disappearance underground of some others, and the publicity that the *Bande Mataram* case had given to his work, all compelled

him openly to lead the Nationalists at Midnapore. Surendranath, who led the Moderates, was unable to persuade Sri Aurobindo to agree to a resiling towards the Moderate position. In the open session, there was a "vehement clash" between the two parties, and the Moderate leaders called in the police to restore order. After the clash, the Nationalists held a separate conference with Sri Aurobindo as President, and thereby gave a lead to Bengal and a warning to the stage-managers of the Surat Congress. The Lokamanya was overjoyed and asked Sri Aurobindo to bring as many Nationalist delegates as possible to Surat so that their cause might not suffer by poor representation. Sri Aurobindo himself thought that, although the Midnapore experience showed how the Nationalists, young and old, smarted "under the autocracy of the old workers" and seemed to think of a separate movement instead of constant friction within the Congress, "for the present we must put all such thoughts from us".⁴⁰

On 6 December 1907, just before leaving for the Midnapore Conference, Sri Aurobindo wrote another letter to his wife, Mrinalini, who was apparently still staying at Deoghar. A letter dashed off in haste, it nevertheless provides us with a slender clue to the workings of his mind during this period. After answering one or two points raised in her letter of 3rd, he goes on to say that he had not a moment to spare; private and public work, the *Bande Mataram* responsibility and preoccupation with the "complex Congress organisation", all were taking up his time. Then the tone becomes suddenly earnest and weighted with urgency:

Would you listen to a request of mine? I am passing through anxious very anxious times, the

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 18 December 1907.

pressure from all sides is sufficient to drive one mad. And at such a time if you also get upset, it will only add to my anxiety and worry; a letter of encouragement and comfort will give me special force, and I will overcome all obstacles and dangers with a cheerful heart.

He was not unaware of her difficulties and her suffering — the separation, the misunderstanding by relations, the uncertainty — but, having married a man like him, she needs must put up with them:

The suffering is your inevitable lot... because, unlike ordinary Bengalis, I am unable to make the happiness of the relatives and of the family the main aim of my life. In these circumstances, what is my Dharma is also your Dharma; and unless you consider the success of my mission as your happiness, there is no way out.

This was no unusual situation either. In the early days of the Congress, when gentlemanly leaders met in conference off and on, the women as a rule kept in the background. Politics in those days was a conveniently part-time affair, a hobby almost, and involved no risks; professional or domestic life was hardly interrupted. A colourful visitant like Sarojini Naidu was merely the proverbial exception. As the tempo of the movement changed, however, politics became a whole-time mission or vocation; and there was the danger of disruption of family life, and the possibility of persecution and incarceration. Revolutionaries like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, V. V. S. Aiyar and Jatindranath Mukherjee (Bagha Jatin), of course, ran even greater dangers. When the fight for independence became a mass movement, the women could hardly keep (or be kept) out. In South Africa as

later in India, Kasturba Gandhi had to bear the cross in her own way as much as the Mahatma. After 1920, it became natural for the *sahadharminis* of the leaders to take some part in public life, and many went to jail. In 1930 and in 1942, the trend was more marked still. But in 1907, the situation was rather different. There were Bengali women like Sarala Ghoshal who were in active public life, but such instances were very rare. Sister Nivedita (she, like Annie Besant, was an exception too) was a burning brazier of the revolutionary spirit. Yet most women thought—or were made to think—that their place was in the home where sometimes they ate their hearts out worrying about their husbands, brothers or sons. Thus Mrinalini's was a typical, not an exceptional, case. If she felt puzzled, if she instinctively held back, if she occasionally even groused, it was understandable. And that Sri Aurobindo should have ardently invoked the Shakti in her to aid him in his great and difficult work was equally natural. He knew that the Nationalists and Moderates might clash at Midnapore, he knew that Midnapore would set the pace for Surat. He no doubt relied on his own inner strength, but he asked also for his wife's silent sovereign support, for he knew it had tremendous spiritual efficacy.

On his return to Calcutta from Midnapore, Sri Aurobindo was busy for a few days attending to arrears of work and organising the delegation to Surat. On 15 December, he addressed a public meeting supporting a resolution on the Nationalist programme that was to be forwarded to the Surat Congress. During the train journey, he halted at Nagpur for a couple of days and addressed a public meeting; after Midnapore, he had had to get used to this kind of public campaigning. One

among his audience at Nagpur was his Cambridge colleague on the "Lotus and Dagger" — but Mr. Moropant Joshi could now hardly believe the change in his friend, and went on gaping at him.

And so, carrying fate in his hands, Sri Aurobindo went to Surat.⁴¹

IV

The Surat Congress was scheduled to begin on 26 December 1907. For some days previously, that historic town was agog with excitement, rumours, confabulations, discreet soundings, parallel war councils. The rival parties were busy massing their respective strengths, and most of the stalwarts on either side were already there. As the Moderates had substantial support in Surat itself, it was feared that the local people would be mobilised to any required extent by the party managers. But the Nationalists too were by no means so weak as to lose heart from the beginning. In fact, it seemed difficult for impartial observers to foretell which way the political wind would blow. This was the reason why party mobilisation went on till almost the opening of the regular session.

In the Moderate camp, Mehta was an imperious and dominant force, Gokhale was intellectually and morally the most distinguished, and Surendranath was the neces-

⁴¹ Some of the Bengal Nationalists wanted to avoid Surat, and hold a separate Congress at Nagpur. Moonje and Chidambaram Pillai supported the proposal. But Tilak wired: "For God's sake, no split." Sri Aurobindo acquiesced, and so they went to Surat. C. C. Dutt has recorded that, along with Barin, a few boys also went to Surat carrying fire-arms, and had instructions from Dutt "to close round Aurobindo Babu in case there was a row." (*Sunday Times*, 17 December 1950).

sary counterpoise to the strong Extremist contingent from Bengal (which included even Revolutionaries like Barindra). As for Rash Behari Ghosh, the President-elect, he was known to be a brilliant lawyer with a lucrative practice, as an erudite and polished speaker, and as a perfectly safe politician from the point of view of the Moderates. In the opposite camp, there was Lajpat Rai wearing the crown of recent persecution and deportation; there was Sri Aurobindo — to many a dark horse still — who appeared calm in his ocean oneness on the eve of a storm; and there was Tilak, and on either side there was none at the time to equal him in his oak-like massiveness and stature. Surat was really Tilak's Congress.

In an Introduction that he contributed in 1918 to *Speeches and Writings of Tilak*, Sri Aurobindo divided the Lokamanya's active life into three periods. Born in 1856 in the year of the Mutiny at Ratnagiri, Tilak began as a teacher at Poona and started the *Kesari* in Marathi and the *Mahratta* in English. During the first period, 1880 to 1890, he was prosecuted for defamation and had to spend four miserable months in jail, prison conditions at the time being atrocious. He withdrew from the Deccan Education Society in 1890, and during second period, 1890-1906, he brought about the political awakening of Maharashtra. Feeling chagrined that the average Hindu lacked purposeful initiative, Tilak organised — or perhaps only revived — the Ganapati Festival in 1893, which in course of time played an important part in promoting a sense of unity among all the Indian castes and in advancing the political education of the masses. Two or three years later, he likewise revived the Shivaji Festival, galvanising public enthusiasm on the issue of — it wasn't opportune to be too clear at the

time about the ends! Ganapati was a very pleasant God, and Shivaji was the greatest of the Mahratta heroes: what was wrong in celebrating them? But Ganapati was also the slayer of the demon Gajasura, and Shivaji had given a crippling blow to the great Mughal. Wasn't Tilak actually preparing a mass movement against the demon-rule of the foreigner, wasn't he really hoping to turn the rising tide of patriotism against the alien bureaucracy? Tilak attended the annual Congress sessions and he entered the Bombay Legislative Council in 1895, and in both forums he gave a vitriolic touch to the otherwise tepid proceedings. In 1897 he was arrested for sedition and tried by a jury consisting of a majority of Englishmen whose majority view led to his conviction. But Government soon realised that, although legally convicted, Tilak had risen ten times in the estimation of his countrymen, and this belated recognition was responsible for his release in 1898.

The political climate in India towards the turn of the century, the travail of the people, the rising tempo of disillusion with British rule, the blatant careering of the self-seekers and place-hunters, the endless wobblings of the 'orthodox' Congressmen, all served in due course to crystallise Nationalism (or Radicalism or Extremism) as a powerful philosophy of mass action. Tilak had read Sri Aurobindo's outspoken articles in the *Indu Prakash* (1893-4), they had first met at Baroda in 1901 and cultivated an immediate friendship, and their minds worked in much the same way. Like Sri Aurobindo, Tilak too had his affiliations with the Revolutionists; and again like Sri Aurobindo, he tried to keep civil agitation separate from revolutionary activity. As his biographers, G. P. Pradhan and A. K. Bhagwat, put it:

As a leader... it was his responsibility to see that all efforts for achieving freedom were carried on in the correct manner, and he therefore gave advice to the leaders of the revolutionary wing. He did not want the decision of the opportune moment to be entrusted to a less mature person ... He thought that only Aurobindo and himself could take such a momentous decision. He knew that a revolutionary action was too serious a matter to be decided by anyone except those who had attained a philosophic calm of mind.

Curzon's highhanded administration and his decision to cut Bengal into two offered the necessary fuel to the engine of Nationalism, and the *Bande Mataram*, Swadeshi and boycott agitations in Bengal and elsewhere defined with fierce clarity the sanctions behind the nation-wide movement for the early achievement of Swaraj or independence

It was during this third and culminating period (beginning in 1906) of Tilak's career — when he was already the 'King of Poona' (*Aj Poona-ke Raja*) and the acknowledged leader of Maharashtra — that he was drawn into the field of all-India politics and became the principal spokesman of Nationalist India. He was, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "the very type and incarnation of the Maratha character, the Maratha qualities, the Maratha spirit, but with the unified solidity in the character, the touch of genius in the qualities, the vital force in the spirit which make a great personality readily the representative man of his people".⁴² It was inevitable that the *zeitgeist* should throw up such a colossus as he:

⁴² *Bankim—Tilak—Dayananda* (1955), pp 21-2

The condition of things in India being given, the one possible aim for political effort resulting and the sole means and spirit by which it could be brought about, this man had to come and, once in the field, had to come to the front.⁴³

While he was peculiarly the representative man of his sub-nation, Maharashtra, he was also the representative Indian whom the Vedic Rishis could have hailed as a comrade and whom it was also Mr. M. A. Jinnah's ambition to emulate as a fearless nationalist. Besides, Tilak—who was to be described as the Father of Indian Unrest by Sir Valentine Chirol—was no mere demagogue, a democrat he certainly was, moving with the common people as among equals, yet he was no demagogue, pandering to the common prejudices or soliciting cheap public applause. Neither was he a rabid revolutionary, intent merely to destroy; he wished rather to build the future on the sure foundations of the past, and he would have liked to work through existing institutions wherever possible. Again, although he had ideals, he was no simple dreamer or idealist; he had a practical shrewdness of judgement which was the despair of his political opponents. The man was so remarkable that the will of the nation could have said, "This man and his life mean what I have in my heart and in my purpose".⁴⁴ With Tilak there was no difference between the aim and the strength of will that carried it into the domain of realisation. To this purity of aim and adamant will were joined a capacity for sacrifice and a readiness to face suffering. It was this combination of qualities that made Tilak the Generalissimo of the Nationalists at the fateful Surat Congress.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 14 ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 15.

On the eve of the Congress session, Surendranath Banerjea got together the delegates from Bengal and tried to make them accept a compromise draft agreement, but Satyen Bose tore up the paper, and the meeting came to an abortive end.⁴⁵ The Nationalists from the different Provinces also met to review the position and plan their strategy.⁴⁶ As Nevinson has described the scene in *The New Spirit of India*:

Grave and silent—I think without saying a single word—Mr. Aravinda Ghose took the chair, and sat unmoved, with far-off eyes, as one who gazes at futurity. In clear, short sentences, without eloquence or passion, Mr. Tilak spoke till the stars shone out and someone kindled a lantern at his side.

A photographic snap of the meeting is available, and one can see Sri Aurobindo at the centre, sitting impassive and calm in the presidential chair, his hands resting on the table, his face slightly tilted to the left, as if watching Tilak,—and Tilak himself, masterful in his bearing, his body a little bent towards the audience in front, his right hand on the table, his left hand raised a little as if to emphasise a point. The audience—some squatting on the ground, some sitting on benches or chairs, and many standing—so grim, attentive, determined. Another group portrait of this time shows Sri Aurobindo and Tilak at the centre, a shawl thrown across Sri Aurobindo's torso, a walking-stick in Tilak's hand: Sardar Ajit Singh to Sri Aurobindo's right, sitting, and Saiyad Haider Reza, to Tilak's left, also sitting: Khaparde and Ashwini Kumar Datta sitting in front

⁴⁵ Purani, *Life*, p. 118.

⁴⁶ The Nationalist contingent from Madras was quite strong and inclu-

and Moonje, Ramaswami and Kuverji Desai standing behind. Holding the centre, Sri Aurobindo and Tilak make a unity in contrast, a totality of immeasurable strength. Sri Aurobindo the teacher, the poet, the man of imagination and reverie, of intuition and spiritual poise—Tilak the lawyer, the mathematician, the man of intellect and erudition, of incisive logic and imperturbable equanimity: these were the master-minding duumvirate of the Nationalist leadership and they enjoyed the unquestioned allegiance of their numerous followers.

It was clear to the Nationalists that the tactics that had been adopted earlier at the Midnapore Conference would be repeated at Surat. The Reception Committee at Midnapore had first passed the Nationalist resolutions on social boycott, self-defence and Swadeshi, but the Swaraj resolution was more anaemic, and the Nationalists had demurred. It was promised then that the question could be reviewed at the Subjects Committee before it went to the plenary session, but the President (Mr. K. B. Datta) had later gone back on his word. The Nationalists were therefore obliged to raise the matter at the time of the formal election of the President, but there they had been snubbed by Mr. Datta, the police had been called, and the Police Superintendent had taken his seat between Datta and Surendranath! There had been trouble over the constitution of the Subjects Committee too, and the Nationalists had had to leave the conference and hold their own separate session with Maulvi Abdul Haq in the chair. Just as at Midnapore that ignoble attempt had been made to retreat from the Calcutta stand of December 1906, at

ded V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, V. Chakkarai Chetti, Subramania Bharati the poet and S. Doraiswami Aiyar.

Surat too — and on a much bigger scale — the Moderate leaders tried to whittle down the Calcutta resolutions. The agenda with the draft resolutions was made available only at the eleventh hour, and was found to embody serious deviations from and dilutions of the Calcutta resolutions, whereas the Nationalists wanted to make these the base and proceed further. At the meeting of the Reception Committee, the Moderates had a comfortable majority and baulked every move of the Nationalists. It was also known that the Moderates wanted to push through the new Constitution for the Congress which would have helped them to retain control over the organisation for many more years to come. This was the reason why the Nationalists held their separate meeting under Sri Aurobindo's chairmanship and decided to "prevent the attempted retrogression of the Congress by all constitutional means, even by opposing the election of the President if necessary".⁴⁷ The Moderates, on the other hand, were equally determined to have things their own way. The stage was set at last for a sensational trial of strength between the two parties. The Moderates managed to bring about 1300 delegates, while the Nationalists could muster only 1100. When the meeting began, Surendranath Banerjea proposed Rash Behari Ghosh for the Presidentship. Tilak stood up immediately to propose Lajpat Rai instead. The temporary Chairman refused Tilak permission to speak, but Tilak insisted on his rights as a delegate, read his resolution, and started speaking. The rest may be described in Sri Aurobindo's words:

There was a tremendous uproar, the young Gujarati volunteers lifted up chairs over the head of

⁴⁷ A.C. Mazumder, *Indian National Evolution*, Appendix B, p. xlii.

Tilak to beat him. At that the Mahrattas became furious, a Maratha shoe came hurtling across the pavilion aimed at the President, Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, and hit Surendranath Banerjea on the shoulder. The young Mahrattas in a body charged up to the platform, the Moderate leaders fled after a short fight on the platform with chairs, the session broke up not to be resumed. The Moderate leaders decided to suspend the Congress....⁴⁸

Before coming to the meeting, the Nationalists had privately decided to break the Congress if they could not swamp it; this decision was unknown to Tilak and the older leaders, but Sri Aurobindo knew about it, and in fact it was he who, without consulting Tilak, "gave the order that led to the breaking of the Congress".⁴⁹ Presently, Lajpat Rai informed Tilak that a final split might provoke the Government to resort to ruthless repression of the Nationalists. Tilak too thought that, perhaps, the Nationalists should join the Moderates in their proposed "national conference" and even accept the new Constitution, lie low for a while, and wait for a more favourable time to assert themselves. But Sri Aurobindo was firm, and so the Nationalists decided to keep away from the Moderate Convention. The Congress had split, and that was that.⁵⁰

Sri Aurobindo thus took a heavy responsibility on himself by giving the order to bring about the split and by preventing a reunion on the Moderates' own terms. And when chairs were being raised and shoes were being hurled — when all that pandemonium was being enacted — Sri Aurobindo had remained imperturbably

⁴⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 81-82. ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 82.

calm, only surrounded by a few younger revolutionaries from Midnapore. He knew — as warned by Lajpat Rai — that repression would now be in full swing. And, indeed, Tilak was arrested not long afterwards, tried and sentenced to transportation for six years on the majority verdict of seven Englishmen against two Indians. Sri Aurobindo himself was to spend a whole year at the Alipur jail. Nationalists all over the country were to experience the full rigours of despotic foreign rule during the next few years. The Moderates were to dwindle into increasing unimportance, the Nationalists were to be imprisoned, silenced or driven underground. Why did Sri Aurobindo take upon himself all this awesome responsibility?

Before leaving Calcutta for Surat, Sri Aurobindo had written in the *Bande Mataram*:

We must go as pilgrims to our Mother's temple. We have a great work to do and cannot afford to be negligent and half-hearted. Be sure that this year, 1907, is a turning-point of our destinies, and do not imagine that the sessions of the Surat Congress will be as the sessions of other years. Let us fear to miss, by absenting ourselves, the chance of helping to put in one of the keystones of the house we are building for our Mother's dwelling in the future, the house of our salvation, the house of Swaraj.⁵¹

It was in a religious, rather than a political, spirit he had gone — and had asked his fellow-Nationalists to go — to Surat. Compromise was unthinkable on certain issues, and Sri Aurobindo didn't want to compromise on the question of Swaraj. Repression too didn't frighten him. It might

⁵¹ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 15 December 1907.

be, he thought, Repression was needed to sting the nation to sovereign aspiration and mighty effort — as fire is needed to purify gold. If he took the decision — even over the head of Tilak, so to say, and against all the reasonings of the intellect — it was only because of the lightning clarity of his intuition. Speaking some months later, Sri Aurobindo said that “the breaking-up of the Congress at Surat was God’s will.... We shall not be eager for compromise to avoid trouble and persecution, as sufferings are welcome if it be God’s will that we should suffer so that our Mother India should be saved”.⁵² And, of course, Sri Aurobindo was right in the long run. History is with him, not with the Mehtas, Gokhales and Rash Beharis. The Surat split led to the Home Rule movement during the first world war under the leadership of Tilak and Annie Besant, and then to Gandhiji’s non-cooperation movement in 1920, Salt Satyagraha in 1930 and ‘Quit India’ in 1942, — and on to independence on 15 August 1947. The Moderates, on the other hand, became the Liberal party, and they became fewer and fewer and more and more ineffective, and lost at last their group and individual identity alike.

Perhaps, at this distance of time, it is hardly necessary to blame the leaders on either side for what happened at Surat. The Congress nearly split again at Tripura in 1939, and split spectacularly during 1969. The leaders who figured in the 1907 split were not all of a piece. Between Mehta at one extreme end and Sri Aurobindo at the other, there were so many gradations of moderatism and extremism, and Surendranath and Lajpat Rai were uncomfortably poised at the centre, Surendranath inclining a little towards the right and Lajpat Rai towards the

⁵² *Speeches*, p. 31

left. They were all honest patriots enough, but they had their ideological and temperamental differences and limitations. There had to be that trial of strength at Surat and subsequent mud-slinging before the dialectic of the national movement could effect a forward swerve and jump, but this need not prevent our admiration from going out equally — though not necessarily to an equal extent — to both the Moderates and Extremists, or liberals and radicals, for they were all men who tried to grapple according to their lights with tasks of almost superhuman difficulty. After the split, the rival groups gave their own versions of the happenings, the Nationalist version being signed by Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, Khaparde, H. Mukherji and B. C. Chatterji.

Although Sri Aurobindo didn't return to Calcutta at once, his editorial and other contributions continued to appear in the *Bande Mataram*. In the series of articles entitled "Death or Life", Sri Aurobindo developed an argument not dissimilar to the line of thought underlying Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, notably the chapters 'Phoenix' and 'Organic Filaments'. Destruction and creation are for ever going on, and the future is in very truth being formed in the present. The debacle at Surat was but the preordained prelude to an imminent rebirth. Sri Aurobindo concluded this series of articles with this prophetic declaration:

The old organisations have to be reconstituted to adapt themselves to the new surroundings. The death complained of is only a transition. The burial ground of the old Congress is, as the Saxon phrase goes, only God's acre out of which will grow the real, vigorous, popular organisation.⁵³

⁵³ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 12 January 1908.

After the Pabna session of the Bengal Provincial Conference, held under Rabindranath Tagore's presidentship, there was a gleam of joy that the two parties could come together again on a common platform and pass agreed resolutions. Bengal had given the lead in 1906 at Calcutta, but "the gods were jealous as of old, and at last there was the split at Surat" — "a monstrous and unnatural division... a quarrel among comrades-in-arms"!⁵⁴ But once again Pabna had given the lead to India, Rabindranath and Surendranath had helped the cause of unity, and it was as though the "martyrs of Nationalism" had not suffered in vain. Would India now follow the lead given by Bengal at Pabna?

The Surat happenings were also the theme of a satirical poem and a satirical drama, both the work of Shyamsundar Chakravarti. The verse skit was the supposed effusion of "Alexander-de-Convention during his unhappy abode in the Sleepy Hollow at Surat", and it was in obvious imitation of Cowper's *Alexander Selkirk*.⁵⁵ The phrase "Sleepy Hollow" carried most of the indictment. The play — "The Slaying of the Congress — a Tragedy in Three Acts" — was rather more elaborate and more pointed in its satire. In the first Act, Dada-bhai Naoroji introduces to the assembled delegates in Calcutta the "Lady Congress".

Much have I laboured, toiled for many years
To see this glorious day. Our Lady Congress
Grown to fair and perfect womanhood,
Who at Benares came of age, is now
With pomp and noble ceremony arrived
In this Calcutta to assume charge

⁵⁴ *Bande Mataram*, 15 February 1908.

⁵⁵ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 12 January 1908.

Of her own life into her own proper hands.⁵⁶

Subsequent scenes are located in Bombay, Poona, Bombay again, and finally, Surat, the principal characters are the Moderate leaders, and there are also symbolic abstractions like Democracy, Nagpur and Surat. In the end, the Mehta group are shown as succeeding in their endeavour to "slay the Congress". A clever and amusing skit, it is interesting mainly because it tells us something about the way tempers were frayed at the time.

V

From Surat Sri Aurobindo went to Baroda and stayed there for about a fortnight. We have seen how he had begun *prāṇāyāma* some years earlier, and how its regular practice had yielded some rather striking results — improved health, ease and fluency in poetic composition, a general outflow of energy, and even a certain limited power of subtle sight. At Calcutta, owing to the pressure of political and journalistic activity, he had been irregular with *prāṇāyāma*, and that was partly the reason why he had a breakdown in health in the latter half of 1906. He had recovered substantially, and the pursuit of politics in the spirit of religion — service of the Mother, looking upon India as the Mother — had dominated his thoughts and activities throughout 1907. It was the time when the country came first, last, all the time, and if there was total consecration, it was to the country as the visible Divinity the Mother. But Sri Aurobindo had always felt that Yoga could help him to acquire Power, and as the difficulties of political realisa-

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 16 February 1908.

tion increased, he thought that he should harness that Power, *brahmatej*, and use it in the service of the country. The Mother had to be liberated first, and there would then be room for other service. And serving the country would also be serving humanity everywhere. Intuitions came to him like sudden shafts of lightning, and he could on those occasions by-pass or race beyond the intellect, relying only on the wisdom and power of the Unseen Guide. A great equanimity was indeed his, and he could be unruffled even when everybody else around him seemed to be disturbed or agitated. He was already a man apart, and he seemed to have gleams of a sixth sense denied to others. But he wished through Yoga to mobilise more fully, more creatively, the faculties within, and to convert the current calm into a positive and infallible power for action in the political field.

At Surat, Sri Aurobindo met a Maharashtrian Yogi, Sakhare Baba, and this confirmed him in his desire to pursue Yoga more systematically than he had hitherto done. It was suggested that Vishnu Bhasker Lele, another Maharashtrian Yogi, might be able to help Sri Aurobindo, and so Barindra wired to Lele to come from Gwalior (where he was staying at the time) to Baroda. Sri Aurobindo's own return after the lapse of a year and a half created a great sensation in Baroda. Although the Principal of the Baroda College had directed the students *not* to go out to meet Sri Aurobindo, they did just the opposite; they ran out of their classes, let loose the horses that were yoked to the chariot in which he was being taken in procession, and pulled the chariot themselves part of the way. Sri Aurobindo gave three lectures on the political situation, and these were very well attended. During this period of his life, Sri

Aurobindo seems to have adopted an almost ascetic severity, wearing only cotton shirts, travelling in third class compartments, sleeping on the wooden seats with only the hand for a pillow. It being mid-winter in Baroda, he had to use the Pashmina shawl that Sardar Mazumdar gave him.

It was at Khasirao Jadhav's house, where Sri Aurobindo was staying with Barin, that the first interview with Lele took place. As regards Yoga, Lele told Sri Aurobindo that he should completely suspend all political activity, at least for a few days. Then they two closeted themselves in a small room in the top floor of Sardar Mazumdar's house for three days. Recollecting that time, Sri Aurobindo said later in 1932:

"Sit down," I was told, "look and you will see that your thoughts come into you from outside. Before they enter, fling them back." I sat down and looked and saw to my astonishment that it was so; I saw and felt concretely the thought approaching as if to enter through or above the head, and was able to push it back concretely before it came inside. In three days — really in one — my mind became full of an eternal silence — it is still there.⁵⁷

Lele's advice was that Sri Aurobindo should strive to empty his mind of all mere mental stuff — to make the mind a sheet of white paper ready to receive a piece of Divine calligraphy — to purify the system by ejecting all ego-stuff so that the Divine might take possession of it and direct its future operations. It was but a little hint from "a man without fame... a *bhakta* with a limited mind but with some experience and evocative power",⁵⁸ no more than a tiny seed, yet it fell on the

⁵⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 130-1. ⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 126-7.

most fertile soil, and grew into a mighty tree
Branching so broad and long that in the ground
The bended twigs take root, and daughters grow
Above the mother tree, a pillared shade
High overarched, and echoing walks between.⁵⁹

The three-day effort to insulate the mind from the invasion of extraneous thoughts had brought Sri Aurobindo to a condition of unbelievable silence of the mind, a condition which he was able to maintain for many months, and indeed always thereafter. As he described the condition to one of his disciples subsequently:

In a moment my mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit, and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside; I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain, and in three days I was free. From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free Intelligence, a universal Mind, not limited to the narrow circle of personal thought as a labourer in a thought factory, but a receiver of knowledge from all the hundred realms of being and free to choose what it willed in this vast sight-empire and thought-empire.⁶⁰

The body, of course, continued its manifold functions of walking, talking, eating, seeing, hearing, sleeping, but without any obtrusive egoistic consciousness. It was as though he had dissolved and become one with the ethereal oneness of omnipresent reality. By achieving this ineffable silence of mind and consciousness, Sri Aurobindo had become one with the ineffable Brahman, which

⁵⁹ *Paradise Lost*, IX, ll. 1004-7.

⁶⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 133.

made all else seem unimportant. It was this stupendous experience that Sri Aurobindo later described poetically in his *Nirvana*:

All is abolished but the mute Alone.

The mind from thought released, the heart from grief
Grow inexistent now beyond belief;

There is no I, no Nature, known-unknown.⁶¹

This immaculate crown of Advaitic or Nirvanic realisation, while inducing the supernal inner calm, rendered even normal surface activities an unreal continuum of unconsciousness. Things were happening, he was apparently engaged in activity, but he himself didn't know how or why.

Once Sri Aurobindo came out of the little room in Sardar Mazumdar's house, he couldn't withstand political or even revolutionary activity. He was going through the customary motions, like a puppet as it were. He and Barin had discussions with Chotalal B. Purani about the possibility of organising secret revolutionary groups all over Gujarat, along the lines this had been done in Bengal. Barin also gave the formula for making bombs to Chotalal. Ambalal, his younger brother, had attended some of Sri Aurobindo's lectures at Vankaner Theatre and Dandia Bazar, and although not comprehending everything that was said, he had decided to work with his brother's group.⁶² Presently, Sri Aurobindo was invited to Bombay, Poona and other places in Maharashtra to speak on the current political situation. He was in a fix because, after those incredible three days in Sardar Mazumdar's house, Sri Aurobindo's conscious mind had become a total blank. How could he speak before an

⁶¹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 298.

⁶² Purani, *Life*, p. 300.

audience? How was he to develop a political theme? He could think nothing, and he would have nothing to say! But Lele, on being consulted, assured Sri Aurobindo that he might accept the invitations and all would be well.

First Sri Aurobindo went to Poona with Lele, and met Tilak's Guru, Annasaheb Patwardhan, and also met some of the Maharashtrian revolutionaries. He gave two lectures at Poona, on the 12th January on Ramamurti whose feats of physical prowess and endurance had made him a celebrity, and on the 13th on the National Movement in Bengal. The subjects were "given" to him, and he spoke straight on, as it were. Proceeding to Bombay, he spoke at Girgaum on the 15th January on National Education, drawing upon the Bengal experiment and experience. What was meant by National Education was that in teaching history, geography, philosophy and other subjects, an attempt was made to awaken the spirit of nationality among the pupils.

Nothing that is useful or important is neglected in the scheme, and instruction is, as far as possible, imparted in the vernacular.... In profiting by our contact with Western civilisation, we should be careful not to cut ourselves adrift from our original moorings, but should at the same time imitate the Japanese in taking the fullest advantage of modern scientific discoveries. In political matters we have much to learn from the Western nations, and we shall also turn to them for lessons in popular government.... Self-reliance forms the guiding principle of our scheme of education. We do not look to Government for help, as we think that State assistance will destroy our national stamina.⁶³

⁶³ Translated from the summary published in the Marathi *Kesari* and

The most important of the speeches, however, was the one Sri Aurobindo gave on 19 January before the National Union. Although the people knew about the lecture only three or four hours earlier, a gathering of over 3,000 had assembled to hear him. When he went to the meeting, the silence of the mind was the sole reality and there was no stir of activity at all on the surface. But Lele, who had accompanied Sri Aurobindo, asked him to make *namaskar* to the audience and wait, — and speech would come to him from some source other than the mind.⁶⁴ So in fact the speech came, and ever since, all speech, writing, thinking, outward activity were to come to him from the same other-than-mind sovereign source. The Bombay speech, both on account of the subject-matter and the manner of delivery, became justly famous. Sri Aurobindo seemed to the audience as one in the grip of a trance; but as he rose to speak, he found the words. He spoke with feeling, the words carried conviction. He spoke in small, jerky, almost nervous sentences, very unlike the language of a Classical scholar, or the language of the *Indu Prakash* articles or the *Bande Mataram* editorials. He spoke neither like a professional combative politician nor yet like a seasoned statesman. It was more in the tone of the evangelist, the prophet:

There is a creed in India today which calls itself Nationalism... Have you realised, have you yet realised what it means?... What is Nationalism?

quoted in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, XVII 3, August 1965, p. 108.

⁶⁴ cf !Jesus. "Do not consider anxiously what you are to say or how you are to say it; words will be given to you when the time comes; it is not you who speak, it is the Spirit of your Father that speaks in you." (*The New Testament*, translated by Ronald Knox, 1947, p. 20.)

Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live.... You must remember that you are the instruments of God... in Bengal, Nationalism has come to the people as a religion, and it has been accepted as a religion. But certain forces which are against that religion are trying to crush its rising strength. It always happens when a new religion is preached, when God is going to be born in the people, that such forces rise with all their weapons in their hands to crush the religion.... Nationalism has not been crushed. Nationalism is not going to be crushed. Nationalism survives in the strength of God and it is not possible to crush it, whatever weapons are brought against it. Nationalism is immortal; Nationalism cannot die.... God cannot be killed, God cannot be sent to jail...⁶⁵

How utterly devoid of mere political verbiage or legalistic qualification! The word "Nationalism" is repeated again and again with a caress almost, as if the word were really a "flame-word rune". And, as if anticipating the "brown sahibs" of the post-Independence era, Sri Aurobindo continues:

Have you got a real faith? Or is it merely a political aspiration? Is it merely a larger kind of selfishness? Or is it merely that you wish to be free to oppress others, as you are being oppressed?

The worldly-wise people, however, must have heard the speech (was the man raving?) with a shudder and a snigger, and gravely nodded their heads in disapproval. The cold rationalists were probably aghast that God —

⁶⁵ *Speeches*, pp. 3 ff.

who, like the British Crown, should be above politics — was being trotted out as a clinching argument, or as the only argument, from a political platform. But the vast majority were awed into acquiescence, they were won over, they were clean bowled! Sri Aurobindo presently launched upon a frontal attack on the Beast of Intellectualism:

What does this intellectual process lead you to? This intellectual process, if it is used honestly, if it is followed to the very end, leads you to despair. It leads you to death. You have nothing which can help you, because you have no material strength at present which the adversary cannot crush and the adversary will certainly not be so foolish as to help you, or to allow you to develop the necessary strength unmolested.... The only conclusion is that there is nothing to be done. The only conclusion is that this country is doomed.

Vivekananda's great intellect readily submitted to something far greater in Ramakrishna. *Brahmatej* was greater than *kshatratej*, soul-force could defy the might of the mightiest. Programmes too — Swadeshi, Boycott, National Education — were not everything. What, then, was the one thing needful?

What is it that has helped the older men who have gone to prison? What is it that has been their strength, that has enabled them to stand against all temptations and against all dangers and obstacles? They have had one and all of them consciously or unconsciously one overmastering idea, one idea which nothing can shake, and this was the idea that there is a great Power at work to help India, and that we are doing what it bids us.

Faith, then, was the primary thing; selflessness also was required, for the Nationalists were not pursuing "a political self-interest"; it was a religion they were trying to live, they were trying to realise God in the nation, in the three hundred million fellow-countrymen. The third requirement was courage:

When you believe in God. when you believe that God is guiding you... what is there to fear?... What is it that you have to fear? There is nothing to fear.... What can all these tribunals, what can all the powers of the world do to that which is within you, that Immortal, that Unborn and Undying One, whom the sword cannot pierce, whom the fire cannot burn, and whom the water cannot drown?

The triune virtues and powers — faith, selflessness, courage — should carry them far, very far. Perhaps, people were confused because the leadership was divided, the leaders spoke at cross-purposes, and people didn't know whom to follow. Sri Aurobindo told them simply:

.. you will not need any leader. The leader is within your selves. If you can only find him and listen to his voice, then you will not find that people will not listen to you, because there will be a voice within the people which will make itself heard... you will find that one word from you will awake an answering voice in others.

Towards the end, the short sentences suddenly cease and there is a magnificent winding-up in the peroration. Something was happening in Bengal, and in India; it was the Hour of God when Krishna was in a poise of readiness to emerge from Gokul and declare his godhead. And when that happened, it would be India's destiny,

not to be like other nations, not to rise only by human strength to trample underfoot the weaker peoples, but to see that something came out that enabled resurgent India "to save the whole world".

A new music surely; not statistics, not citations from Burke and Mill and Morley, not appeals to British precedents like the Witenagemot and the Magna Charta and the Reform Bill, not even a harking back to the French Revolution or the American Declaration of Independence. Just an invocation to God and an exhortation to his audience that they should realise God in themselves and thereby shape the life of "this great nation" so that she may be ready to reveal the God in her. They were engaged in no political uprising, no mere political change, but in realising God in themselves and in the nation.

As might have been expected, the Bombay speech was widely discussed and commented upon, praised as well as criticised for the same reason—it made a religion of Nationalism! The *Indian Patriot* lamented Sri Aurobindo's fall from his cultural (or intellectual) eminence and his open derogation of the reasoning faculty. The *Bande Mataram* of 22 February made a direct reference to the Bombay speech and the furore it had caused, but unrepentant Sri Aurobindo reiterated his earlier affirmation:

When we first received a European education, we allowed ourselves to be misled by the light of science. Science is a light within a limited room, not the sun which illumines the world. The *Apara Vidya* is the sum of science, but there is a higher *Vidya*, a mightier knowledge.... Whoever has once felt the glory of God within him can never again

believe that the intellect is supreme.... It is in the heart where God resides.

It was but human vanity that individual leaders lay the flattering unction to their egos that they were thinking, planning, executing. The imponderables in human life often came like a flood and swept away all human calculations. "Revolutions are always full of surprises", wrote Sri Aurobindo in the course of the same article, "and whoever thinks he can play chess with a Revolution will soon find how terrible is the grasp of God and how insignificant the human reason before the whirlwind of His breath". Has any war gone exactly according to the calculations of the war lords? Was Mirabeau or Danton able to regulate the lava-flow of the French Revolution? What then? Does it mean the total abdication of reason? Not altogether — only, one has to be ready always to listen to the other Voice when it comes, one must be willing to permit the heart's sure promptings to supersede the intellect's cold calculations:

The great rule of life is to have no schemes but one unalterable purpose. If the will is fixed on the purpose it sets itself to accomplish, then circumstances will suggest the right course; but the schemer finds himself always tripped by the unexpected. Before Sri Aurobindo left Bombay, one day he saw from the balcony of a friend's house the whole busy movement of the city "as a picture in a cinema show, all unreal and shadowy". This experience he was later to recapitulate in *Nirvana*:

The city, a shadow picture without tone,

Floats, quivers unreal; forms without relief

Flow, a cinema's vacant shapes...⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 298.

While parting from Lele at Bombay, Sri Aurobindo asked for further guidance in the Yoga. But a *mantra* had suddenly risen in his heart, and he was able to assure Lele that it was genuine; Sri Aurobindo could rely on Him from whom the *mantra* had come. Lele then told Sri Aurobindo that there was no further need for instructions; he could henceforth rely on the Guru within, and be guided by the inner Voice.

From Bombay to Nasik, Dhulia, Amraoti, Nagpur — centres of Maharashtrian culture which Tilak had persuaded Sri Aurobindo to visit — and everywhere a spontaneous welcome, and everywhere a memorable speech or two. On the 24th January, he spoke at Nasik on Swaraj: the favourite theme — Swaraj was *amrita*, Swaraj was *mukti*, and this was true as much for the individual as for the nation. Hadn't Shivaji, inspired by the gospel of Tukaram and Ramdas, led the country to freedom? That miracle could be re-enacted once more. On the 25th at Dhulia, the subject being Swadeshi and Boycott. At Amraoti on the 29th, the meeting commenced with the singing of "Bande Mataram", and Sri Aurobindo spoke on the history and significance of the song. The *mantra* was no poetic concoction of Bankim Chandra's, but a revivification of an old mantra that had gone into obscurity and desuetude. As with the individual, so with the nation: there were three sheaths or *kosas*, the *sthūla*, the *sūkshma* and the *kāraṇa sarīrās*, the gross, subtle and causal bodies respectively. The reality of the soul of the nation was infinitely more important than the body or its apparent life-currents. It needed a Yogi and a Rishi to see this soul-truth about India and embody it in the mantra "Bande Mataram".

From Amraoti to Nagpur, where Sri Aurobindo deli-

vered three lectures, on "The Policy of the Nationalist Party", "The Work Before Us" and "Commercial Swaraj and Educational Swaraj" on 31 January and 1 February. Yet once again, Sri Aurobindo tore the veil of Appearance and showed that there was a spiritual reality behind the material façade, that behind the hurly-burly of political controversy and agitation, behind the glare of opinion and action, God was fulfilling Himself and leading the country to its destined goal. What he said had an unfamiliar ring, it was not the usual language of the political market-place, but its very novelty, its tone of deep sincerity, and its sheer Messianic fervour carried all before it, and the people who had seen and heard him even once could not be quite the same afterwards. It was the alchemic touch of a Man of God.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ON THE EVE

I

A brief retrospect may be timely here. When Sri Aurobindo left India for England in 1879, he was but a boy of seven and he had lived a sheltered life at home and at the boarding school at Darjeeling. During his stay of almost fourteen years in England, he first grew in general ignorance of conditions in India. But gradually, during the years at Cambridge, his eyes were opened to Indian realities when his father began sending copies of the *Bengalee*, with passages marked relating to the instances of British misgovernment in India. Even at the precocious age of eleven, Sri Aurobindo had awakened obscurely to the feeling that the world — and India — might soon see great revolutionary changes, and that he might himself have to play a part in the movement; but the feeling now hardened into a settled conviction. He organised the secret society of the “Lotus and Dagger”, — though it ultimately came to nothing, — and he participated in the debates at the Indian Majlis. His deep interest in the Irish revolutionary movement and his admiration for Parnell were a reflection of his increasing inner preoccupation with India’s own predicament, which was indeed worse than Ireland’s. His first spiritual experience of immense peace and calm and joy on touching Indian soil at Apollo Bunder in Bombay instantaneously quickened his political sensibility by giving it a mystical dimension. It did not take him long at Baroda to size up India’s political life, the elegant

petitioning, the ceremonial mendicancy and the general futility of it all. His "New Lamps for Old" articles in the *Indu Prakash* were meant to bring this home to the Indian politician, but they only shocked and scandalised the Congress leaders, and Sri Aurobindo was persuaded to stop that line of attack. Turning now to Bankim Chandra Chatterji, about whom Sri Aurobindo wrote a series of articles in 1894 in the *Indu Prakash*, he found in the Bengali novelist a true patriot, not less a patriot and a fighter for using only his pen as the flashing sword and the genre of creative fiction as the field of battle for the inauguration of an era of awakening in the country.

Since the kind of manly political activity he had tried to generate in India had been ruled out by the postures of the established Congress leaders, Sri Aurobindo began formulating—with Bankim's seminal ideas in his mind—an alternative plan of campaign, namely the organisation of secret revolutionary activity on a wide basis preparing for an armed insurrection at the appropriate time. He established contacts with existing groups in Western India, took the revolutionary oath himself, and administered it to others; and, in particular, he made Bengal his main field of operation, and among his principal executants were Jatin Bannerjee who had received training in the Baroda army and Barindra, Sri Aurobindo's younger brother. In Bengal, there were already the revolutionary groups organised by Barrister P. Mitter and Sarala Ghoshal (Chaudhurani), and by 1903 a strong base had been established in Bengal, the central direction being vested in a committee of five consisting of Sister Nivedita, C. R. Das, P. Mitter, Suren Tagore and Jatin Bannerjee.¹

¹ Among the Bengali revolutionaries of the time was Mujibur Rahman

Then came the Partition of Bengal, the great upsurge in Bengal and in the country as a whole, the "Bhavani Mandir" Pamphlet which acted as heady wine to numerous revolutionaries, and the launching of the Swadeshi, Boycott and National Education movements, and the stepping up of the national demand for "Swaraj" or Independence, and not merely colonial self-government on an unending instalment plan. Sri Aurobindo had, in the meantime, been initiated into certain Yogic practices like *prāṇāyāma*, and he had come to the conclusion that advance in Yoga might give him an accession of strength to pursue his political work, not only with greater efficiency, but also with an impulsion of irresistibility. By mid-1906, Sri Aurobindo had decided to leave Baroda service and take the overt plunge into the political maelstrom. He was in Calcutta now, teaching at the National College, editing the *Bande Mataram*, welding the scattered Nationalists in the Congress into a militant party, and secretly keeping in touch with the revolutionary groups.

It was, for Sri Aurobindo, an extraordinary feat of tight-rope dancing on the scene of Bengal and national politics, but he seemed to be able to accomplish it with the ease and naturalness of the fish swimming in water or the bird careering through air. As a professor, he was teaching his pupils the new dynamic of knowledge, not the knowledge that was conveniently marketable at the employment exchange, but the knowledge that was the means of self-realisation through the whole-hearted service of the nation. As editor of the *Bande Mataram*, he taught his readers — and through them the nation — the very alphabet of patriotism and the basic tenets of the religion

It is not known, however, whether he was a relation of his namesake, the "Banga Bandhu" of 1971.

of Nationalism. As the directing intelligence behind the Nationalists, he gave them a cohesion, a purpose, a plank of action — both long-term strategy and short-term tactics — to battle with the bureaucracy within the provisions of the civil law of the land. The *Bande Mataram* was both the accepted mouthpiece and the keeper of the conscience of the Nationalists of Bengal, and in course of time even of the Nationalist party of India. When the National Demand became nothing less than Swaraj or Independence, where were the sanctions behind the demand? The Nationalists were a political party working openly and with due regard to the limitations imposed by the law. A disarmed nation, an emasculated people — they had no resources, no will-power even! For a Demand pitched so high, what were the sanctions the Nationalists had in mind? Sri Aurobindo's answer was "Passive Resistance". Defy the law openly when necessary, and accept the consequences! This was the dress-rehearsal for the Gandhian non-cooperation, civil disobedience and 'Quit India' movements of the early twenties, thirties and forties.

But although Sri Aurobindo hoped that in India, and with an adversary like the British bureaucracy (a milder brand compared to the German or Russian), Passive Resistance itself — if organised intensively and on a national scale — might be able to win the freedom struggle, still he couldn't be quite sure on that point, because the history of nations that had fought their way to independence didn't promise such a prospect with anything like certainty. His political standpoint was by no means entirely pacifist, and he wasn't opposed to violence or violent revolution on principle or as being forbidden by the spirit and letter of the Hindu scriptures. He was later to elaborate, in the fifth chapter of the first series of his

Essays on the Gita, his ideas on the subject holding out in favour of the idea of Dharma Yuddha. The rule of confining political action to passive resistance was adopted as the best policy for the national movement in the psychological and other conditions prevailing at the time, and not as part of a gospel of non-violence or *ahimsa* or peace. Sri Aurobindo at no time wished to conceal his opinion that a nation was entitled to attain its freedom by violence, if there was no other way and if the country had developed sufficient strength to organise guerilla warfare or open insurrection. Whether a peaceful or a violent method was to be pursued would depend on what, in the given circumstances, was the best policy and not on purely ethical considerations like those that were put forward later by Mahatma Gandhi. In an article on 'The Realism of Indian Nationalist Policy', Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Bande Mataram* of 24 April 1908:

The old politicians failed to recognise that what they called constitutional agitation was only a form of diplomacy, and that even prayers and petitions could succeed, not through the force of their logic, but absolutely through the creation of some other force in the country, the show of which could convert these *prayers* into *demands*, and by appealing to the sense of prudence in the bureaucracy, compel them to accede to the articulate wishes of the people.... As the preparedness for war and the maintenance of large armies and navies contribute to the maintenance of international peace more effectively than the disbandment of the national armies would possibly do, so the creation of a strong determination in a subject people to face every form of repression and tyranny and assert its will through organised

measures of passive resistance against the despotic authority that rules them, can alone help the progress of peaceful reforms in their administration.

This was of course written long before the establishment of the League of Nations and of the United Nations Organisation, after the first and second world wars respectively. Sri Aurobindo expressed himself in favour of these attempts to put down war by international agreement and international force, but should these ever succeed completely (or to the extent they succeed), that again would not be *ahimsa* but merely the containment or putting down of anarchic by legal force, and even so one couldn't be sure that such peace would be permanent. It was Sri Aurobindo's view that, while peace was part of the highest ideal of individual and collective life, it must be spiritual or at the very least psychological in its basis; without a change in human nature — the supersession of egocentric thought and action by something far more widely based and sustained — real peace couldn't come with any finality. If attempted on any other basis like a mental principle or the gospel of *ahimsa*, it would not only fail but might also leave things worse than before.²

Since such was the inner reality of the Indian political situation as Sri Aurobindo saw it, he took steps to prepare the way for an armed insurrection also, if all else should fail. If possible, through constitutional means with or without passive resistance; but passive resistance

² *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 40. It was, perhaps, for this reason that, although the Congress had ostensibly accepted Gandhian *ahimsā* from 1920 onwards, yet when freedom came in 1946-7, unprecedented violence was let loose in the country, especially in Bengal and the Punjab, resulting in the killing of tens of thousands, acts of bestiality and brutality, and the uprooting of millions from their respective homelands.

too failing, armed revolution was inevitable — such was the inexorable logic behind Sri Aurobindo's two-pronged long-term plan of campaign against the alien bureaucracy. Hence Sri Aurobindo's affiliations with the revolutionaries in Western India and Bengal: hence his continuing close links with the Revolutionaries after his coming to Bengal in 1906: hence his anxious watch on the *Yugantar*, and later on the *Nava Sakti*, which were the *de facto* organs of the Revolutionaries. And all this was both facilitated and necessitated by the circumstance that his younger brother, Barindra, was among the chief brains behind the activities of the revolutionary groups in Bengal.

Tilak in Maharashtra, the other important centre of revolutionary activity, was trying to exercise the same kind of distant control over the revolutionaries as Sri Aurobindo was doing in Bengal, and there was a great ground of common agreement between the two leaders, an agreement going back in a way to 1893 when his anonymous "New Lamps for Old" articles won Tilak's approval, but placed on a firm footing after 1901 when the Maharashtrian leader met Sri Aurobindo for the first time in Baroda. They could work together because their national aims were identical, and in their equipment one was richly complementary to the other and together they made a formidable combination strong enough to throw out of gear the calculations and contrivances of the phalanx of Moderate leadership from Allahabad, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.

II

In this delicately poised situation, the Moderate-Extremist debate on the ends and means of Indian politi-

cal activity gave the necessary handle to the Government to launch repression of the most ruthless kind. It was easy to pretend to assume that the Moderates represented responsible opinion, while the Nationalists were but a pack of hot-heads whose postures of extremism were really setting back the clock of progress! Now repression invariably produces results that are very different from those expected. Some of the Moderates at least found it impossible to keep silent and therefore came out against the Government and condemned the policy of repression. The Nationalists, far from being cowed down by the repressive measures, only stepped up the tempo of their agitation. They gained fresh recruits too, some even from the Moderate fold. Quite a few of the Nationalists decided that the Government was beyond persuasion or redemption, and so went over to the ranks of the revolutionaries.

In the event, it was the revolutionaries that really found themselves in a quandary. They were no doubt wedded to a policy of preparation for an armed rebellion at the right time to overthrow the alien Government and seize power throughout the country. But this was a long-term policy, and had to be spread over a number of years, perhaps two or three decades. Physical exercises, lathi-and-rifle practice, collection and distribution of arms, bomb-making and bomb accumulation, organisational elasticity coupled with overall discipline, propaganda for new recruits and subversion of army units, and above all the religious accent to the movement by equating the whole revolutionary activity with worship of Bhavani, Bhavani Bharati — these were the essential ingredients of the secret revolutionary movement as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. The aspiration to join the movement, the rejection and sacrifice of personal interests that the

aspiration involved, the total surrender of everything (including one's life) at the altar of the Mother, all partook of a religious rite and a religious vocation. Nolini Kanta Gupta has recorded how, as a mere boy, at dead of night in front of a picture of Kali, he took a vow written out in blood drawn from his chest that he would "dedicate his life to the whole-hearted service of the Motherland".³ In an earlier chapter (VIII. iv), we have seen how Sri Aurobindo administered the revolutionary oath to Barindra, who had a sword in one hand and a copy of the *Gita* in the other.⁴ The way would-be revolutionaries approached Sri Aurobindo and were then admitted into the revolutionary fraternity may be illustrated from one case-study. One of the already initiated, Upendranath Bandyopadhyaya, had introduced an aspirant, Amarendranath Chatterji, to Sri Aurobindo, and the interview probably took place in 1907 at his place in Scott's Lane. When Amarendra saw Sri Aurobindo, it was as though the mere sight or *darshan* was itself a kind of initiation or *diksha*; it was as though some current of energy was passing from Sri Aurobindo to Amarendra. The private conversation between the two, as recollected by Amarendra in 1950, was as follows, and seems to have been fairly typical of such encounters at the time:

Sri Aurobindo began: "I suppose Upen has talked to you about the work that is to be done for the

³ *Reminiscences* (1969), p. 6.

⁴ In exceptional cases, the oath was not administered. It was, for example, in a house in Girgaum that Sri Aurobindo offered to take C. C. Dutt, I.C.S. into the secret organisation. Dutt said, "I am yours unreservedly and unconditionally." Sri Aurobindo didn't give any oath, and Dutt adds: "I felt deeply grateful to him for this trust" (*Sunday Times*, 17 December 1950).

country. I hope there is no doubt or vacillation or fear in your mind about it."

Amar: "Will you not say something yourself?... I want to hear from you. Have you heard anything about me?"

Sri Aurobindo: "I have heard about you. You have given a lot of money to the Swadeshi movement.... But is the country going to be freed by the politics of salt and sugar only? If we want to secure the freedom of the country, we have to sacrifice everything for it, and we should be ready to give up even our life for it. If we want to free the country, we shall have to conquer the fear of death".

Amar: "How many would be able to do it, you think?"

Sri Aurobindo: "Is it so difficult to sacrifice oneself for the Motherland? Men go through so much suffering and trouble to get happiness in life. No sacrifice should be difficult to make for the freedom of the country. If India does not become free, man also will not be free..."

Amar: "Upen has told me about being ready to sacrifice myself and I have replied to him, on the basis of what Bankim has said, that as one day death is inevitable, why should one fear it? My fear comes from another quarter. I feel at present that I am not worthy of such a great mission. Is there any means of attaining that fitness?"

Sri Aurobindo: "Surrender yourself to God and in the name of the Divine Mother get along with the service of India. That is my *diksha* to you".⁵

The religious background is unmistakable. Although the

⁵ Quoted in Purani, *Life*, pp. 126-7.

immediate aim is the liberation of India, the ultimate aim is the liberation of humanity: *If India does not become free, man also will not be free!* Again, for the neophyte the pass-word is *Surrender!* Lose all to gain all!

Many an Amarendra joined the secret party, but few knew about the exact number. Some high Government officers — C. C. Dutt, for example — even they had taken initiation from Sri Aurobindo. Others besides Sri Aurobindo too had been giving the oath to fresh entrants. And it was not surprising that the exact strength and extent of proliferation of the revolutionary party (or congeries of revolutionary groups) was always difficult to determine. Underground activity imposed secrecy, diversion and even a measure of calculated confusion.⁶ But there was no doubt that the revolutionaries, at least an overwhelming majority of them, were young idealists who were ready in a spirit of religious fanaticism to put the country — India the Mother — above personal comfort, prospects or safety. They were resourceful too, fearless, reckless and occasionally even ruthless.

By and by, two developments tended to push the revolutionaries to the path of terrorism. In the first place, the method of systematic preparation for an ultimate nationwide armed revolution seemed too slow, too indefinite, too intolerably fatiguing to young, ardent and impetuous minds. In the second place, acts of repression on the part of the Government seemed to cry for immediate retaliation. The revolutionaries knew of course that terrorism wasn't the right way: that path, "as we had seen about Russia... led only to mutual assassinations, murder and revenge.. in an endless succession, leading to no

⁶ Surendra Mohan Ghose has said that both he and his father, unknown to each other, were members of a Revolutionary Group.

final issue".⁷ And yet, in the face of the Government repression — constant police searches, arrest and handcuffing of revered leaders, brutal sentences for minor offences, the merciless beating of Manoranjan at Barisal for shouting "Bande Mataram!", the flogging of mere boys in court — in the face of all this, were the revolutionaries to keep quiet? And so the desperate word sometimes went forth: Shoot the Governor! Kill the District Magistrate! Derail the train! Plant a bomb in a book to be presented! These activities were but rarely successful, and some were caught in the act and many while preparing to act and many more on mere suspicion. And money was required to defend the men so caught. Upto a point, free medical aid and free legal service were available. But revolutionary activity as well as expenses for defence required a lot of money, and thus the revolutionaries occasionally found themselves driven to commit political dacoities as well. This had been decided upon "as one of our methods of collecting funds, for the moneys that came from gifts were not sufficient, and people rather shied of making gifts for the work of such secret societies".⁸ This must have led sometimes to dacoits making use of terrorists, and the words terrorist and dacoit almost becoming interchangeable terms. This meant more police action, more repression and more terrorism, and more and more desperation all round. One of the great dare-devil revolutionaries of the time, Bagha Jatin (Jatindranath Mukherjee), was "Dada" to everybody, knew Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita, and among his staunchest followers was M. N. Roy who was to become

⁷ Nolini Kanta Gupta & K. Amrita, *Reminiscences*, p. 12.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 14-5. Also see article on 'Bagha Jatin' by Prithwindra Mukherjee (*Mother India*, October 1964).

a leading figure in international Communism and in his later life the prophet of Radical Humanism. Jatin Mukherjee met Sri Aurobindo in 1903, and thereafter he was one of his principal lieutenants in the revolutionary movement. "A wonderful man", Sri Aurobindo described him in his later years, "he was a man who would belong to the front rank of humanity anywhere. Such beauty and strength together I haven't seen, and his stature was like a warrior's".⁹ Even the British Commissioner of Police, Sir Charles Tegart, who was responsible for the final chasing and death of Jatin, felt compelled to say, "I have met the bravest Indian". On the other hand, Jatin too was driven to organise political dacoities to sustain the revolution and also to provide adequate legal defence to the accused revolutionaries. Those were, indeed, times out of joint, defying prim ethical categorisations, and making it difficult to draw a sharp line of distinction between the mad and the maddened, the criminal and the avenger, the creators of disorder and the defenders of order.

The position of leaders like Tilak in Maharashtra and Sri Aurobindo in Bengal was exceedingly difficult. Sarala Ghoshal, one of the pioneers of the revolutionary movement in Bengal, has been quoted as giving this important piece of information:

My lathi cult was in full swing in those days... and captured the heart of the Bengali youth. But to my dismay... some of my lathial boys felt tempted to join those bands (of political dacoits and terrorists).... Tilak told me distinctly that he did not approve of the dacoities, much less authorise them, if for nothing else, simply on the score of their being

⁹ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 46.

practically useless for political purposes. But looking to differences in human nature and the varying processes of evolution, suited to different temperaments, he did not condemn them openly.¹⁰

Sri Aurobindo too didn't approve those deviations and perversions of the revolutionary movement, for his idea throughout was an armed revolution after adequate preparation. Once, when Sister Nivedita asked him whether it was one of his revolutionaries that had threatened Gokhale with death, Sri Aurobindo was able to assure her that it wasn't so.¹¹ But generally speaking, he found Bengal too emotional, wanted results too quick, and wouldn't prepare through a long period of years.¹²

The Bengali paper, *Yugantar*, that had commenced its tempestuous career on 12 March 1906, was run by Barin, Bhupendranath Datta and Abinash Bhattacharya and promulgated, week after week, its message of revolution and advocated guerilla warfare in unambiguous terms. Sri Aurobindo came to Calcutta soon after, took charge of the *Bande Mataram*, and also exercised some control over the *Yugantar*. Early in 1907, Barin thought that the time had come to give some practical shape, in however modified or modest form, to the earlier Bhavani Mandir scheme. The idea then had been that a Mandir should be established in a suitable spot on the hills, and in fact Barin had gone in search of such a site on Kaimur Hill near Rhotargarh on the Sone but caught malignant fever there and returned. Now it occurred to Barin that a miniature Bhavani Mandir should be started in Calcutta to translate into action the vitriolic policies propagated

¹⁰ Quoted in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* (XIV, 1), February 1962, p. 96 fn.

¹¹ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 293. ¹² *ibid.*, p. 58.

by the *Yugantar*. There was a piece of family property, the Manicktolla Gardens, in Murari Pukur Bagan in north Calcutta, and Barin decided to move there and start operations. It was a wild place, about two and a half acres in extent, and "anybody could enter the Gardens from anywhere at any time and move about the place, for it was all open compound without any fencing or walls". There were two pools, more weeds and mud than water, and plenty of serpents, frogs and fish. The "gardens" were really "primitive jungle, a tangle of shrubs and creepers, with all sorts of insects and reptiles roaming within. And the one-storeyed house where we were supposed to live was in ruins".¹³ There were three rooms on the ground-floor and a connecting veranda, and around there were some coconut, mango and betelnut trees.

Whatever its shortcomings, it was an eerie enough place for the location of the Mandir, and Barin managed to recruit a group of about "a dozen or fourteen" ardent young men. Barin interviewed aspiring entrants before recruiting them, and easily communicated to them his own infectious enthusiasm for the cause. In the early days at least, Sri Aurobindo seems to have occasionally paid a visit to the Gardens, Nolini has recorded that he was once sent by Barin to bring Sri Aurobindo to the Gardens, but as he hadn't taken his lunch he couldn't come.¹⁴ The small group, with Barin at the head, all lived at the Gardens, cooked their own food and washed the dishes, read the *Gita* as expounded by Upendranath Bandyopadhyaya, read revolutionary literature, and held discussions about the bomb. Barin wrote on the Princi-

¹³ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, pp. 21, 15-6.

¹⁴ *ibid*, pp 16-7

ples of Modern Warfare in the *Yugantar*, Nolini read at the Imperial Library books like Clausewitz's *The Art of War* and at his home town of Rungpur a book on the history of Secret Societies. They also meditated, prayed to Durga, and cultivated extreme austerity. The cooking was done in earthenware vessels once a day ("almost every day it was *khichrī*"), and something readymade bought from the market sufficed for a second meal. Several of them were but amateurs in almost everything, but sincerity, ardour, devotion, determination and the readiness to dare and suffer made up for all other deficiencies. Reading the *Gita* was part of the inner discipline, and partly it was a cover for other activities like bomb-making and the procurement—through purchase, theft or loot—of rifles and pistols and their deployment among the revolutionary groups. There was some shooting practice too in the Gardens, and at least the trunk of one mango tree showed abundant signs of having been used as a target.

After the Surat Congress and Sri Aurobindo's experience of Nirvana under Yogi Lele's guidance, it came as a brain-wave to Barin that Lele might be useful at the Manicktolla Gardens also and he might be able to put some new Yogic strength into the members of the revolutionary group. But when Lele came to Calcutta and found out that the young men had accepted the cult of the bomb and were engaged in terrorist activities, he tried to persuade them that such violently *raja-sic* action had no part in spiritual life. Nor was it necessary, said Lele, to resort to violence and bloodshed, for freedom would come even through peaceful means. But the young men were in no mood to lend ear to such words. Even Lele's blunt warning that the

path they had chosen would lead to no success but only land them in disaster made not the slightest effect on the boys. They were no Vaishnava ecstasies — they were hero-warriors of Durga¹⁵ They were determined to go their own way, and some five of them went to Deoghar to conduct a secret test-explosion of a bomb they had made at the Gardens. The bomb did explode among the hills, but also killed one of the young men, Prafulla Chakravarti, and injured another, Ullaskar Datta. They were shaken, and Barin could only say: "This is a field of battle Our first soldier has given up his body in the battlefield, this is our first casualty".¹⁶ The body was left where it was, and the four survivors returned to Calcutta.

The Manicktolla group were one less, but there was no diminution in their determination to push on with their dangerous programme of spasmodic terrorism. But the police too were not altogether asleep. It is true one Inspector of Police really took them to be a group of austere Brahmacharins and even joined their *Gita* classes. But the antecedents of Barin and a few others at least were very well known to the police, and the young men found that they were being shadowed wherever they went. And the net seemed to be drawn closer and closer as the revolutionaries tried to be more and more careful and circumspect. It was the perfect cat-and-mouse situation for the police and the young men, and for Sri Aurobindo who knew what was going on at the Gardens, knew of the risks and dangers involved in such

¹⁵ Lele was eager to take away one of the young men, Prafulla Chakr, and make a Rajayogin of him. But Prafulla preferred to stay with Barindra and the Manicktolla group.

¹⁶ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, p. 31.

undertakings, yet could neither effectively restrain those uncertain courses nor afford the young men any massive protection, — for Sri Aurobindo it was a most difficult situation indeed.¹⁷ During the last months of 1907 and the early months of 1908, Sri Aurobindo was thus obliged to bear a burden of multiple responsibility — responsibility unaccompanied by the necessary backing — and only he the *sthitaprajña* could bear it all, self-poised and serene and self-reliant under all circumstances of tension and turmoil and terrible uncertainty.

III

Sri Aurobindo returned to Calcutta, after an absence of over a month, in the first week of February 1908. Here too he was now much in demand as a public speaker. The themes were the same old themes — Nationalism, self-help, arbitration, the ethics of suffering, the glory of unselfish service and the necessity for reviving all that was intrinsically good in Hindu dharma. But because of Surat, and even more because of the experience of Nirvanic calm, there was a haunting new intensity in his utterances, a new purity, a new flame-like glow like the rising Sun's touch of gold on casements opening on the East. The Surat events themselves made apparently little difference to him; he had taken them in his stride, that was all. While at Baroda, he had met the Maharaja

¹⁷ Nevertheless, when C.C. Dutt offered to stay on in Calcutta to look after the boys, Sri Aurobindo ("the Chief") told him with a gracious smile: "I assure you, Charu, I shall look after the boys here. But you must go back to your job. . . Well, there are reasons why my best recruiting sergeant must be in Ahmedabad just now." (*Sunday Times*, 17 December 1950).

once at his request; an attempt was made, perhaps, to detach Sri Aurobindo from active politics, but it couldn't make him swerve in the least from his chosen course. No doubt, the Yogic experience of Nirvanic calm caused a profound change within, but his outer activities seemed to go on as before except that all thought, speech and action now acquired a strange power of spontaneity and air of inevitability, as though it was not Sri Aurobindo but some great higher Power working through him that was the real source of the thoughts and words and the executant of the actions. The voidness in the mind didn't mean a drain of life-energies; it rather meant that all the movement of life was directed, not from the lower centres of consciousness (as with most people), but from a sovereign source above, and this force "made the body do the work without any inner activity"; "I carried on a daily newspaper", Sri Aurobindo said later, "and made a dozen speeches in the course of three or four days — but I did not manage that in any way; it happened".¹⁸

While Lele was in Calcutta, he met Sri Aurobindo in mid-February 1908. Lele was of the opinion that there was some danger in Sri Aurobindo following mechanically his "inner voice", for this might after all be from an Asuric force! After his encounter with Barin's Manicktolla group of reckless young men, Lele probably connected their activities remotely with Sri Aurobindo's inner voice and hence concluded it might have an Asuric origin. Sri Aurobindo released Lele from his responsibility as Guru, and informed him that he would henceforth pursue his *sādhana* on his own, for it was very clear to Sri Aurobindo that the Voice that guided him was indeed a genuine force from the Divine. The Guru-Sishya rela-

¹⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p 137.

tionship thus terminated, Sri Aurobindo was now without an external guide for his Yoga, and he was equally without complete rapport with either Barin who was going his own way at the Manicktolla Gardens or Mrinalini who could not quite reconcile herself to the steep and narrow path of austerity and sustained sacrifice that her husband had chosen for himself. Sri Aurobindo was thus already lone in his nude self, splendid in his solitariness like a thin column of fire, a steady beacon unruffled by the storm-winds, mists and thunder-clouds all about.

There are two portraits of the period that give us some intimations of the vast potencies of strength that that lone figure seemed to contain during the fateful twelve months between mid-1907 and mid-1908. In the first, taken at Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo is seen seated in a chair:

A poise of unhurried power touched with something holy confronts us in the seated yet alert body, one foot thrust forward, the finely shaped fingers half-closed in a sensitive but strong grip, the mouth at once calm and set, the nostrils of the semi-acquiline nose a little dilated with ardour, the eyes wearing a firm look that goes far and still more far, the whole expression of the broad-browed and thick-moustached face in-drawn to a concentrated potentiality of leaping fierily forward... enough is here to convince us that whatever walk of life he may choose, he would be a grand doer no less than a grand dreamer, and that he is born to hold the helm of world-affairs.¹⁹

¹⁹ K.D. Sethna in the *All-India Weekly* (April 1945), reviewing the first edition of *Sri Aurobindo* by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar.

In the second, taken at Baroda immediately after the Surat Congress, Sri Aurobindo is seen standing, his left-hand clasping a walking-stick as if it were a wand of destiny, a huge garland round his neck merging with the thick-folded Pashima shawl thrown across the torso and falling over the shoulder in front, the whole attitude relaxed yet strangely intent, the eyes gazing into infinity — into all futurity. It is the same power, it is the same person, as in the other portrait, but everything is heightened or deepened, the man is greater Man, the man of vision is doubled with the man of action and both are trebled with the potential fulfiller of a world's vague and vast desire.

During the three months following, Sri Aurobindo made the utmost of the media at his command: platform-speech, leading article, or essay in exposition; and every week that passed, like every advancing moment of the reddening glory of the Sun about to set in the evening (but, of course, only to rise some hours later in the splendour of a Greater Dawn) — it was the hour of tremendous poise and marvellous self-sufficiency in political and revolutionary leadership.

Although it was Sri Aurobindo who had taken the crucial decision to break the Congress at Surat and given the word at the proper time to bring that about, it was not that he wished to block reunion on honourable terms. The split had served its purpose and focussed public attention on what the Nationalists stood for, and therefore on his return to Calcutta he was not unwilling to do all in his power to get the two wings of the Congress under a common banner. As he pointed out on 10 April 1908 at a well-attended public meeting held at Panti's Math, the Congress at Surat had broken

up, not over personalities, but over procedural irregularities and especially over certain basic differences in policy. The Moderates had tried to take too much advantage of a local majority to flout national opinion as it had crystallised earlier at the Calcutta Congress. The election of Rash Behari Ghosh as President was itself open to criticism on procedural grounds. But Sri Aurobindo added:

We are ready to condone this irregularity if a united Congress is to be held on the basis of the Calcutta resolutions. If the other party does not accept, the responsibility of breaking up the Congress and having a party institution in its place will be on their shoulders. Our position is, let us work on our different party lines through our own institutions, but at the same time let us have the united Congress of the whole people.²⁰

Two days later, addressing a Swadeshi meeting at Barui-pur (in the District of 24 Parganas), Sri Aurobindo said boldly:

People say there is no unity among us. How to create unity? Only through the call of our Mother and the voice of all her sons.... The voice is yet weak but it is growing. The might of God is already revealed among us.... It is not our work but that of something mightier that compels us to go on until all bondage is swept away and India stands free before the world.²¹

As for "practical steps", Sri Aurobindo realised from the outset the importance of organising village *samitis* and of carrying the gospel of Swaraj through them to the masses. Speaking on the Palli Samiti resolution at

²⁰ *Speeches*, pp. 32-3. ²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

Kishoreganj in April 1908, Sri Aurobindo said:

If we are to survive as a nation, we must restore the centres of strength which are natural and necessary to our growth, and the first of these, the basis of all the rest, the old foundation of Indian life and the secret of Indian vitality, is the self-dependent and self-sufficient village organism. If we are to organise Swaraj, we must base it on the village.... The village must not in our new national life be isolated as well as self-sufficient, but must feel itself bound up with the life of its neighbouring units, living with them in a common group for common purposes.²²

In an article 'Back to the Land' in the *Bande Mataram* of 6 March 1908, Sri Aurobindo deplored the fact that, lured by the lucrative jobs and professions in the city, the people (the Bengali Hindus in particular) had migrated wholesale from the villages, thereby losing possession of the soil and "the source of life and permanence". Intellectual eminence, as exhibited in the court room or the political platform or council chamber, was *not* enough.

Intellectual prominence often goes hand in hand with decadence, as the history of the Greeks and other great nations of antiquity has proved; only the race which does not sacrifice the soundness of its rural root of life to the urban brilliance of its foliage and flowering is in a sound condition and certain of permanence.

The village should neither be weakened nor isolated from the stream of national life, and village-sufficiency should not be held up as a substitute for national unity

²² *ibid*, pp. 41-2.

and strength. The one without the other was meaningless, and would in fact be impracticable; if the villages were the root and the sap, the cities and the national entity were the foliage and the flowering. As Sri Aurobindo pointed out in another article entitled 'The Village and the Nation':

Nothing should be allowed to distract us from the mighty ideal of Swaraj, National and Pan-Indian. This is no alien or exotic ideal, it is merely the conscious attempt to fulfil the great centripetal tendency which has pervaded the grandiose millenniums of her history, to complete the work which Sri Krishna began, which Chandragupta and Asoka and the Gupta Kings continued, which Akbar almost brought to realisation, for which Shivaji was born and Bajirao fought and planned.... The day of the independent village or village group has gone and must not be revived; the nation demands its hour of fulfilment and seeks to gather the village life of its rural population into a mighty, single and compact democratic nationality.²³

But while Sri Aurobindo was not blind to the exigencies of practical politics or to the importance of village *samitis* and similar institutions of corporate life, in his main speeches and articles he confined himself to the stupendous generalities, the perennial imperatives, on which alone all durable social and political structures could be reared. Suffering itself was not necessarily a thing to flee from, for in that historic situation suffering had become the badge of our tribe — a discipline to ennoble us, purify us, and awaken the slumbering soul within. In his Baruipur speech, delivered on 12 April 1908, Sri

²³ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 8 March 1908.

Aurobindo related the well-known parable of the two birds and drew from it an elevating political lesson. The story is in the Rig Veda: "Two birds beautiful of wing, friends and comrades, cling to a common tree, and one eats the sweet fruit, the other regards him and eats not...."²⁴ But when the bird eats the bitter fruit, the spell is broken, and he looks at his brilliant companion, sitting higher up:

This is evidently a parable concerning the salvation of individual souls who, when they enjoy the sweets of the world, forget to look upwards to the Paramatma who is really none else than their own highest self, and when they forget themselves in this way through the 'Maya of this world, bitterness comes to dispel the Maya and revive the true self-consciousness. The parable is equally applicable to the national *mukti*. We in India fell under the influence of the foreigner's Maya which completely possessed our souls. It was the Maya of the alien rule, the alien civilisation, the powers and capacities of the alien people who happen to rule over us. These were as if so many shackles put our physical, intellectual and moral life into bondage.... It is only through repression and suffering that this Maya can be dispelled and the bitter fruit of Partition of Bengal administered by Lord Curzon dispelled the illusion. We looked up and saw that the brilliant bird sitting above was none else but ourselves, our real and actual self. Thus we found Swaraj within ourselves and saw that it was in our hands to discover and to realise it.²⁵

In his Kishoreganj speech, again, Sri Aurobindo went

²⁴ I.164.20 (Sri Aurobindo's translation). ²⁵ *Speeches*, pp. 35-7

beyond the immediate subject of village *samitis* to lay the main stress on the basic problem of national "unity":

But the unity that we need for Swaraj is not a unity of opinion, a unity of speech, a unity of intellectual conviction. Unity is of the heart and springs from love. The foreign organism which has been living on us, lives by the absence of this love, by division, and it perpetuates the condition of its existence by making us look to it as the centre of our lives and away from our Mother and her children. It has set Hindu and Mahomedan at variance by means of this outward outlook.... Each man is for himself and if anything is to be done for our brothers, there is the government to do it and it is no concern of ours. This drying up of the springs of mutual affection is the cause which needs most to be removed.²⁶

Wise and candid words, and as opportune today — over sixty years later, and almost twenty-five years after Independence — as when they were first spoken; and alas! as little heeded today, as they were then. People do not wish to think in terms of community and brotherhood, or of the common motherhood that the name of India must evoke; the bureaucracy — then white-dominated, now a matter of uniform brownness — is everything, and is expected to do everything, and must take the blame for everything.

IV

April 1908 was a month reverberating with sinister foreboding. In retrospect, one feels like recalling the

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 45-6

opening lines of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Although the Congress had split at Surat, the Moderate Convention — like the torn tail of a lizard — made frantic attempts to wag agitatedly and pretend to the gorgeous proportions of the whole body. On the morrow of the split, on 28 December 1907 the two parties had met separately as the Moderate Convention and the Nationalist Conference respectively. The Convention appointed a Committee to draft a new Constitution for the Congress, and this Committee was to meet at Allahabad on 18 and 19 April with Rash Behari Ghosh as Chairman. Sri Aurobindo wished to warn the Committee against certain fallacious courses, and so he wrote in the *Bande Mataram* on 4 April:

The Convention is an attempt to drag back the Congress out of the twentieth century into the nineteenth. It is as much a futile piece of reaction as Mr. Morley's Council of Notables. The same exclusive, oligarchical spirit of the past trying to dominate the future, of the few with wealth, position and fame for their title claiming the monopoly of political life, animates the idea of the Convention.

While the leaders of the Convention seemed eager to keep the Nationalists out of the Congress at any cost, the Nationalists were ready for reunion, making "no stipulation except that no creed shall be imposed on the Congress from outside, no action be taken which implies that the Convention is the arbiter of the destinies of the Congress". From the public postures of the two parties,

it was clear enough that the Convention being conscious of its inherent weakness wanted to get into a burrow of its own contriving, but the Nationalists, being likewise conscious of their growing strength, were quite willing to thrive in the open and free air.

Writing again two days later in the *Bande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the Subjects Committee was "the brain of the Congress and must be democratised" if the Congress itself was to be democratic; and in any future Constitution, election to the Subjects Committee should be "regulated by the principles of democratic representation, not of oligarchic nomination". Two days later, on 8 April 1908, Sri Aurobindo warned again that the attempt of Pherozeshah Mehta and his associates to convert the Congress into a close preserve of the privileged was not only imprudent, but would be "soon found out by them to be impotent also". Sri Aurobindo returned to the subject on the day of the Allahabad Convention (18 April), and dealt squarely with the Moderates' objections to the Nationalists' supposed unruliness: "If the Nationalists are unruly, the Moderates are autocratic, and it is the autocratic misuse of power which creates the unruliness". Then Sri Aurobindo exposed, with a pretty devastating and remorseless clarity, the real reasons for the Moderates shying away from the Nationalists:

This loss of position and prestige with the bureaucracy is the ruling motive with the Bombay Moderates, the fear of being involved in the persecution to which the Nationalists willingly expose themselves is the dominant thought among the respectabilities of Bengal.... Whether the Nationalists have or have not the courage to face the full fury of

bureaucratic persecution and the strength to survive it is a question which will probably be decided before another year is out. The Moderates, at any rate, imagine that they cannot, and rejoice over the pleasant expectation of seeing this over-energetic and inconveniently independent party being crushed out of existence by the common adversary of all. It is the spirit of Mir Jaffar, the politics of Jagat Sett, repeating themselves in their spiritual descendents.

Answering Gokhale's ingenuous plea that the word "national" in the resolution on National Education was removed in the interests of literary elegance, Sri Aurobindo remarked:

...the resolutions of the Congress are not such literary masterpieces that this particular one should have evoked the dead and gone schoolmaster in Mr. Gokhale's breast.... The change of a word for the sake of literary elegance was not surely so essential that the Moderates had to prefer breaking the Congress to breaking the rules of English rhetoric.

After the meeting at Allahabad had ended and confirmed the worst fears of the Nationalists, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Bande Mataram* of 22 April 1908:

We have done our best to carry out the demand of the people for unity; the refusal comes from the other side and there the responsibility will rest.... It is time for us to turn from the attempt to patch up matters with men who are pledged to disruption and concern ourselves with our own proper work.

The very next day, however, Sri Aurobindo threw off all restraint and launched a caustic attack on the Moderates and their stand. Few things that Sri Aurobindo did during his meteoric career of political journalism surpassed, or

even quite equalled, this biting and scalding piece of denunciation, so full of vitriol, so unerring in its strokes, so lashing in its fury:

For a brief moment God placed the destiny of India in their hands and gave them a free choice whether they would serve Him or self, the country or the bureaucracy. They have chosen.... They too have made the great refusal.... It is well.... The day of compromise is past.... If any of them have it in them to repent, let them repent soon, for the hour of grace that is given them will be short and the punishment swift.

The Moderates might lay the self-adulatory unction to their souls that, because they signed petitions, opened funds, attended conferences, passed resolutions, wore *desi* cloth on ceremonial occasions, extolled National Education, took shares in profitable Swadeshi concerns, held patriotic interviews with a Governor or even with a live Viceroy, therefore they could pass themselves off as Nationalists. But such chicanery and calculated self-deception wouldn't pass muster in the future. For the true Nationalists, however, a new era had begun on 19 April 1908:

The work now before us is of the sternest kind and requires men of an unflinching sternness to carry it out. The hero, the martyr, the man of iron will and iron heart, the grim fighter whose tough nerves defeat cannot tire out nor danger relax, the born leader in action, the man who cannot sleep or rest while his country is enslaved, the priest of Kali who can tear his heart out of his body and offer it as a bleeding sacrifice on the Mother's altar, the heart of fire and the tongue of flame whose lightest

word is an inspiration to self-sacrifice or a spur to action, for these the time is coming, the call will soon go forth. They are already here in the silence, in the darkness slowly maturing themselves, training the muscles of the will, tightening the strings of the heart so that they may be ready when the call comes.... What the Mother needs is hard clear steel for her sword, hard massive granite for her fortress, wood that will not break for the handle of her bow, tough substance and true for the axle of her chariot. For the battle is near and the trumpet ready for the signal.

It is no wonder that, reading such a passage, the Moderate leaders felt chastely shocked and insulted: that the bureaucracy took it to be almost an incitement to an imminent insurrection: that the chafing young revolutionaries understood it as a declaration of war, at least as the prelude to an ultimatum. On 29 April, again, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Bande Mataram*:

The sooner the struggle now commences, the sooner the fate of India is fought out between the forces of progress and reaction, the better for India and the world. Delay will only waste our strength and give opportunities to the enemy.... An immense and incalculable revolution is at hand and its instruments must be themselves immense in their aspiration, uncalculating in their self-immolation.... Revolution, bare and grim, is preparing her battlefield, mowing down the centres of order which were evolving a new cosmos and building up the materials of a gigantic downfall and a mighty new creation. We could have wished it otherwise, but God's will be done.

Was Sri Aurobindo referring to the struggle between the Moderates and the Nationalists, or between the Nationalists and the bureaucracy, or between the forces of the future and the ghosts of the past? Perhaps a comprehensive three-pronged struggle! There was a good deal of symbolism in the writing, but what did the symbols mean? Were they really meant to signify the message of the dynamite? Actually, although Sri Aurobindo used strong figurative language, all that he meant to convey was that the calculations of the Moderates and the hopes of the bureaucracy were bound to go awry: that Nationalism would emerge all the stronger from the ordeal: that the tactics of weakness, reaction, selfishness, compromise and exploitation would be decisively overwhelmed by the forces of strength, progress, service, determination and sacrifice. But it was April the cruellest month in Calcutta, and it was far easier to frighten or be frightened than to be calm or courageous. The last perverse twitch of the thread!

Writing in the *Bande Mataram* of 24 April 1908, Sri Aurobindo made this rather startling statement:

There are two things which seem to us to distinguish the new from the old school of Indian politics: first, its intense realism, and, second, its fervent spirituality. The new thought is the direct fruit of the new appreciation of the actualities of their present political situation by the people; and the new ideal is the direct result of the revival of the old spiritual consciousness of the nation.

Realism and spirituality: a strange concatenation! Yet the extreme Nationalist and the avowed revolutionary saw nothing strange in the marriage of realism and spirituality. The revolutionary usually took his oath with

the sword of realism in one hand and the spirituality of the *Gita* in the other. At the Manicktolla Gardens, meditation and prayer and *Gita*-reading went hand in hand with arms-gathering and bomb-making and the study of revolutionary literature.²⁷ Nothing could be more soul-stirring, yet more burning in its realistic intensity, than Sri Aurobindo's Bengali Hymn to Durga, the perfect invocation song for a perfectly realised Bhavani Mandir; and, in a true sense, wasn't the whole country — from Himavanta to Kumari, from Dwarka to Puri and Kamarupa — an extended and consecrated Bhavani Mandir? Here are a few verses from the Hymn in Nolini Kanta Gupta's powerful English version:

Mother Durga! Rider on the lion, giver of all strength, Mother, beloved of Shiva! We born from thy parts of Power, we the youth of India, are seated here in thy Temple. Listen, O Mother, descend upon the earth, make thyself manifest in this land of India....

Mother Durga! Giver of force and love and knowledge, terrible art thou in thy own self of might, Mother beautiful and fierce. In the battle of life, in India's battle, we are warriors commissioned by thee; Mother, give to our heart and mind a titan's strength, a titan's energy, to our soul and intelligence a god's character and knowledge....

Mother Durga! India lies low in selfishness and fearfulness and littleness. Make us great, make

²⁷ In the course of a conversation on 28 February 1940, Sri Aurobindo said, regarding his actual connection with the Manicktolla terrorists. "It was all Barin's work. I was never in direct contact with the movement, nor with the young men and didn't know them. Only in jail I came in contact with them, especially Nolini, Bejoy, etc." (Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Part II, 1971, pp. 244-5.)

our efforts great, our hearts vast, make us true to our resolve. May we no longer desire the small, void of energy, given to laziness, stricken with fear.

Mother Durga! Extend wide the power of Yoga. We are thy Aryan children, develop in us the lost teaching, character, strength of intelligence, faith and devotion, force of austerity, power of chastity and true knowledge....

Mother Durga! Slay the enemy within, then root out all obstacles outside. May the noble heroic mighty Indian race, supreme in love and unity, truth and strength, arts and letters, force and knowledge, ever dwell in its holy woodlands, its fertile fields, under its sky-scraping hills, along the banks of its pure-streaming rivers....

Mother Durga! Enter our bodies in thy Yogic strength. We shall become thy instruments, thy sword slaying all evil, thy lamp dispelling all ignorance.... May our entire life become a ceaseless worship of the Mother, all our acts a continuous service of the Mother, full of love, full of energy.²⁸

Durga, Bhavani, Bharati—the Mother, the Mother Divine—was the ensouled image of India, and unless she inhabited again the hearts of her three hundred million children, unless she set aflame their darkened souls, there could be no hope of the country's regeneration. It was a spiritual or inner revolution that was needed first, and on its base alone could be enacted the political or outer revolution that would change the emasculated subject nation into a resurgent India, alive, strong and free.

²⁸ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 26 (1967), pp. 5-6.

Alike for individual and national salvation, spiritual and material health had to go together.

In what was probably one of the last articles written for the *Bande Mataram*, 'The Parable of Sati', Sri Aurobindo reinterpreted the story of Daksha-Sati-Shiva in terms of the contemporaneous political struggle in India. The Congress was Daksha, at Surat he came to grief (as Daksha did during the great Sacrifice), and when he revived it was with a goat's head (the Convention) turned backwards to the past. Sati was the pure-souled Indian Nation, and Shiva or Mahadeva was India's Destiny. For the time, of course, their union had been frustrated:

But not for ever. For Sati will be born again, on the high mountains of mighty endeavour, colossal aspiration, unparalleled self-sacrifice she will be born again, in a better and more beautiful body, and by terrible *tapasya* she will meet Mahadeva once more and be wedded to him in nobler fashion, with kinder auguries, for a happier and greater future. For this thing is written in the book of God and nothing can prevent it — that Sati shall wed Mahadeva, that the national life of India shall meet and possess its divine and mighty destiny.²⁹

The parallelism here (like the other one, referred to in Chapter X, comparing the life of Nationalism with the life of Sri Krishna) is worked out at perhaps excruciating length, and the parable is here and there twisted to point the political moral. But the peroration is magnificent, for it has the thunderclap of a prophecy that must come true.

²⁹ *Bande Mataram*, 29 April 1908.

V

During the two hectic months of March and April 1908, there were other interests too besides the continually irritating challenges posed by the queer goings-on of the Moderates. There was, for instance, the happy occasion of the release of Bepin Chandra Pal after six months in prison. "We welcome back today, not Bepin Chandra Pal", wrote Sri Aurobindo, "but the speaker of a God-given message; not the man but the Voice of the Gospel of Nationalism".³⁰ In a subsequent article, he described Pal as "the standard-bearer of the cause (of Nationalism), the great voice of its heart, the beacon-light of its enthusiasm".³¹ It was partly as a result of Bepin Pal's sensational tour of Madras in 1907 that, like Bengal, Maharashtra and the Punjab, the southern Province too witnessed Nationalist and revolutionary activity on a truly portentous scale. In his article on 'The Tuticorin Victory', Sri Aurobindo paid a well-merited tribute to V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Siva and Padmanabha Iyengar:

The Tuticorin leaders must be given the whole credit for the unequalled skill and courage with which the fight was conducted and still more for the complete realisation of the true inwardness of the Nationalist gospel which made them identify the interests of the whole nation with the wrongs and grievances of the labourers in the Coral Mill.³²

From Tuticorin the trouble quickly spread to Tinnevely (Tirunelveli), and Sri Aurobindo wrote a few days later to spell out the lessons of the outbreak for the autho-

³⁰ *ibid.*, 10 March 1908. ³¹ *ibid.*, 27 March 1908.

³² *ibid.*, 13 March 1908.

rities as well as the leaders:

For the bureaucracy... it should be an index of the fierceness of the fire which is burning underneath a thin crust of patience and sufferance and may at any moment lead to a general conflagration. Whence does this fire come or what does it signify?... This is no light fire of straw, but a jet of volcanic fire from the depths, and that has never in the world's history been conquered by repression... every day of repression gives it a greater volume and prepares a mightier explosion. To the popular leaders it is a warning of the necessity to put their house in order, to provide a settled leading and so much organisation as is possible so that the movement may arrive at a consciousness of ordered strength.³³

Again, a fortnight later, Sri Aurobindo wrote on the death-grapple between the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company (floated by V. O. Chidambaram Pillai) and the British Steam Navigation Company, and it was in the course of this article that the following ominous passage occurred:

The persecution of Swadeshism, which is now reaching the most shameless lengths in Madras, is a sure sign that God has withdrawn Himself from the British bureaucracy and intends their rapid fall. *Injustice is an invitation to death and prepares His advent. The moment the desire to do justice disappears from a ruling class, the moment it ceases even to respect the show of justice, from that moment its days are numbered.*³⁴

³³ *ibid.*, 17 March 1908.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 30 March 1908 (italics are mine).

And he concluded the article on this note of defiance and faith: "The British jails are not large enough to hold the whole population of Tinnevely district; let every man follow the noble example of Chidambaram Pillai and, for the rest, let God decide".

On 7 April, Sri Aurobindo had occasion to comment again on Bepin Pal and on the "New" Ideal placed by him before the nation in a series of speeches. The nation was weak and enslaved, the nation must become strong and free: but how? The clue to the secret lay *within*. Sri Aurobindo had seen some of Ramamurti's feats of physical endurance, and had spoken on them earlier at Poona. Now Sri Aurobindo drew a political moral from Ramamurti's spectacular display of physical strength:

We have seen Ramamurti, the modern Bhimasen, lie motionless, resistant, with a superhuman force of will power acting through the muscles, while two carts loaded with men are driven over his body. India must undergo an ordeal of passive endurance far more terrible without relaxing a single fibre of her frame. We have seen Ramamurti break over his chest a strong iron chain tightened round his whole body and break it by sheer force of will working through the body. India must work a similar deliverance for herself by the same inner force. It is not by strength of body that Ramamurti accomplishes his feats, for he is not stronger than many athletes who could never do what he does daily, but by faith and will. India has in herself a faith of superhuman virtue to accomplish miracles, to deliver out of irrefragable bondage, to bring God down upon the earth.

That faith, that will, lay coiled within, and had to be

roused to action by the force of a great enough ideal. And such an ideal had been placed before his countrymen by Bepin Pal:

The ideal is that of humanity in God, of God in humanity, the ancient ideal of the *sanātana dharma* but applied, as it has never been applied before, to the problem of politics and the work of national revival. To realise that ideal, to impart it to the world, is the mission of India.

India's *sanātana dharma* embraced, and found free play for, the divers faculties of the body, mind and heart, but its purposeful dynamics had yet to be applied to the field of politics. If this too could be done, she would be in a position to lead the world as well. Her great "new ideal", then, should go beyond National Education, Swadeshi, Boycott and Swaraj — important as they were — and should become the supreme humanistic ideal of saving herself to save mankind:

No lesser ideal will help her through the stress of the terrible ordeal which she will in a few years be called to face. No hope less pure will save her from the demoralisation which follows revolutionary strife, the growth of passions, a violent selfishness, sanguinary hatred, insufferable license, the disruption of moralities, the resurgence of the tiger in man, which a great revolution is apt to foster.

Sri Aurobindo was well aware, as Bepin Pal was, that although in a given situation revolution might be necessary and even inevitable, yet the course of revolutions was apt to be unpredictable, and revolutions had often a corrupting and rotting effect on the people concerned. The only safety-valve was for the revolutionary to ground his action on a great faith, on a great hope,

embracing all humanity, and all future. In two articles written earlier in February, Sri Aurobindo had indicated the utterly impetuous nature of revolutions and also his hope that, by whatever means, India would rise again to greet her future:

Revolutions are incalculable in their goings and absolutely uncontrollable. The sea flows, and who shall tell it how it is to flow? The wind blows, and what human wisdom can regulate its motions? The Will of the Divine Wisdom is the sole law of revolutions and we have no right to consider ourselves as anything but mere agents chosen by the Wisdom.³⁵

This was not long after Surat, and the assumption here is that a revolution is hardly man-made, though it may seem to be; the creatures of the revolution — the “heroes” and the “victims” alike — are no more than frail thistledowns carried briskly forward or cast ashore by the revolutionary current. In the following passage written two weeks later, there is another assumption: the revolution in India would have a spiritual as well as a political impulsion, thereby ensuring the Sunrise of both inner and outer freedom:

God has set apart India as the eternal fountain-head of holy spirituality, and He will never suffer that fountain to run dry. By our political freedom we shall once more recover our spiritual freedom. Once more in the land of the saints and sages will burn the fire of the ancient Yoga, and the hearts of the people will be lifted up into the neighbourhood of the Eternal.³⁶

But writing more than a month later, Sri Aurobindo

³⁵ *ibid.*, 9 February 1908 ³⁶ *ibid.*, 23 February 1908.

seems to have felt the need of a giant anchor that will hold in spite of the tossings of the ship on the tempestuous sea of revolution. Nationalism was a great ideal no doubt, but "a still mightier inspiration, a still more enthusiastic and all-conquering faith" was needed if the Nationalists and revolutionaries were to come safely through "the Valley of the Shadow of Death" that lay ahead of them, the long night of violence and repression and tribulation that seemed to stretch before them. A religion of humanity, a belief in the divinity of man, a faith in the compelling power of selfless action and high-spirited sacrifice — these were the cardinal needs of the moment.

In an article, 'India and the Mongolian', that appeared on 1 April, Sri Aurobindo threw out some amazing speculations about India, Asia and the world:

The position of India makes her the key of Asia. She divides the Pagan Far East from the Mahomedan West, and is their meeting-place. From her alone can proceed a force of union, a starting-point of comprehension, a reconciliation of Mahomedanism and Paganism. Her freedom is necessary to the unity of Asia.... When the inevitable happens and the Chinese armies knock at the Himalayan gates of India, and Japanese fleets appear before Bombay Harbour, by what strength will England oppose this gigantic combination?

Sri Aurobindo's thesis could be summarised thus. If India's freedom was necessary for Asia, it was equally necessary for world peace. Continued British presence in India must sooner or later provoke a Sino-Japanese alliance and joint-action, first to eject the British, then to use India's mobilised strength to exclude Europe from

Asia, Africa and Australia, and finally to smite down European pride, humiliate Western statecraft, power and civilisation, and subordinate them to the dominant Asiatic lead. But if Indian Nationalism could assert itself quickly and decisively and if British bureaucracy could see reason in time, then free India would become Britain's ally, and it might be even possible for a free and strong and self-reliant India, as Bepin Pal had suggested in one of his speeches, "to mediate between the civilisations of Europe and Asia, both of them so necessary to human development". All this was written in 1908, no doubt after Japan's great victory over Russia, but before the two world wars, before the revolutions in China, before Japan's bombing of Calcutta, Visakhapatnam and Madras, and long before Red China's invasion of India from the Himalayas in 1962. It was but a rapid newspaper article, but some of the speculations and warnings were breathtaking, and re-reading the article today with all the knowledge of recent world history that we have, we cannot but wonder how percipient, how forward-looking, Sri Aurobindo had been, how truly prophetic, how constructive and how wise.

Sri Aurobindo was proud of India, and proud of Asia, but from the beginning he had also cultivated a global outlook, and his concern ultimately was with the future health of the human race itself. His dispassionate global view helped him to appreciate the admirable traits in other nations and peoples — England's practical intelligence, France's clear logical brain, Germany's speculative genius, Russia's emotional force, America's commercial energy — but he also thought that the West's mastery of the arts of material life was certainly not enough. Asia's awakening was necessary to restore the balance: "Asia

is the custodian of the world's peace of mind, the physician of the maladies which Europe generates".³⁷ And out of the nations of Asia, India was a land apart and unique:

In former ages, India was a sort of hermitage of thought and peace.... Her thoughts flashed out over Asia and created civilisations, her sons were the bearers of light to the peoples; philosophies based themselves on stray fragments of her infinite wisdom; sciences arose from the waste of her intellectual production....

Then came the invasions, India's sheltered progress was ended, and the long day's journey into the night of enslavement began. She became passive, she grovelled in *tamas*, she chased imitative futilities. But that chapter too was ending. A new Dawn was coming up in the east, a new integration of all existing knowledge and experience was being forged, a bright new hope for India and Asia and the world was in the offing. And Sri Aurobindo wrote, almost at the very moment the clouds were gathering about him:

The function of India is to supply the world with a perennial source of light and renovation.... She sends forth a light from her bosom which floods the earth and the heavens, and mankind bathes in it like St. George in the well of life and recovers strength, hope and vitality for its long pilgrimage. Such a time is now at hand. The world needs India and needs her free.³⁸

³⁷ *ibid*, 9 April 1908. ³⁸ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 3 May 1908.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SADHANA IN PRISON

I

We saw in the previous chapter that during the months of March and April 1908 — especially April — an atmosphere of tension and crisis was building up, the known parties to the undeclared war being the Moderates, the alien bureaucracy and the Nationalists. The Moderates had their Convention and their new Congress Constitution, the bureaucracy were paring their nails to come to closer grips with the Nationalists so as to be able to liquidate them, and the underground revolutionaries were chafing at the Nationalist leash and were impatient to let go a campaign of terrorism. Such was the situation, generally in India, but to a much more pronounced degree in Bengal. In the eyes of the Moderates, Sri Aurobindo and his inflammable writings in the *Bande Mataram* were the major obstacle on the path of slow, orderly, constitutional “progress”. In the eyes of the bureaucracy, Sri Aurobindo was Public Enemy Number One — all the more dangerous because he had a hypnotic hold on his numberless followers young and not so young, his writings were diabolically clever and often couched cunningly in the language of Vedanta or Tantra, and in his movements and actions he was altogether slippery like an eel. He talked of India resurgent, Asia triumphant, and Europe in frantic retreat. He spoke of individual salvation and of national *mukti*. He invoked Shiva’s *tandav* death-dance so that Sati might achieve resurrection. Was he not the author of that notorious

political dynamite, *Bhavani Mandir*? Did he not cause the split at Surat? And Sri Aurobindo didn't even hesitate to preach insurrection. The language of warfare and revolution came as second nature to him. There was the stamp of authority in even his casual utterances, and his speeches and editorials were like winging squadrons racing across the murky political sky to cause confusion and terror among the Moderates and the bureaucracy. The man was too infernally clever, too terribly in earnest, and too utterly unpredictable and uncontainable. Danger was the name of the man. He had to be silenced, he had to be put out of the way.

For some time past, events had been moving swift to what seemed to be their preordained configuration and conclusion. Curzon had divided Bengal, and injured and insulted a great nation, and, by a strange irony of history, his successor Minto was called upon to face the music. As Sir Pratap Singh, a titled dignitary of the time, put it with charming naïvete, "Lord Curzon has strewn Lord Minto's bed with thorns, and he must lie on them".¹ "Sedition" was divined here — there — everywhere, and prosecution after prosecution was launched. *Disaffection* — of course! Which normal person in India could possibly have entertained "affection" for the soulless heartless mindless bureaucracy? And wasn't it absurdly easy for "want of affection" to sour into downright "disaffection"? Yet the promiscuous prosecutions and barbarous sentences continued with mounting ferocity. The arrest and trial of the saintly Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and his death while in detention at the Campbell Hospital had sent out a wave of resentment all over Bengal, all over India.

¹ *India: Minto and Morley*, edited by Mary, the Countess of Minto (1934), quoted on p. 52.

"His declaration in Court and his death", wrote Sri Aurobindo, "put a seal upon the meaning of his life and left his name stamped indelibly on the pages of history as a saint and martyr of the new faith".² Vivekananda's youngest brother, Bhupendranath Datta, wouldn't defend himself and went willingly to jail. And so — printer, publisher, editor, contributor, worker — anyone almost ran the risk of sudden apprehension on the slightest pretext, trial for sedition or conspiracy, and fine and incarceration — or worse.

These endless trials and the heavy sentences passed on the patriots seemed shocking to John Morley himself, and on one occasion he wrote to the Viceroy in an outspoken manner:

I must confess to you that I am watching with the deepest concern and dismay the thundering sentences that are being passed for sedition, etc. We must keep order, but excess of severity is not the path to order. On the contrary, it is the path to the bomb.³

Sri Aurobindo too, in an article on 'Indian Resurgence and Europe', referred to "the extreme of bomb-throwing Anarchism" as one of the symptoms of the modern Western malaise, and would have liked India to be free from such aberrations. But repression and terrorism fed upon one another in a competitive craze, almost as in the parable of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*:

hourly conceived
And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
To me... then, bursting forth

² *Bande Mataram*, 14 April 1908.

³ Quoted in P.C. Ray's *Life and Times of C.R. Das* (1927), p. 58 fn

Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round,
That rest or intermission none I find.⁴

Morley had correctly evaluated the consequences of "excess of severity". The burning anger of the people was particularly directed against one D. H. Kingsford, the District Magistrate of Calcutta who had tried the case against Upadhyaya, — who was even otherwise known for his drastic sentences against the patriots, and who had especially earned undying infamy by ordering the flogging in Court of a boy of fifteen, Sushil Sen, till he fell down unconscious bleeding all over. This last atrocity had so horrified the country and evoked such a storm of protest that Kingsford had to be transferred from Calcutta to Muzzaferpore (now in Bihar). But the revolutionaries had their eyes upon him, and decided to visit him with swift punishment there. On the evening of 30 April 1908, two boys — Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki — threw a bomb at a closed carriage that was supposed to carry Kingsford, but the bomb actually killed two wholly innocent ladies, Mrs. and Miss Pringle-Kennedy, wife and daughter of a local advocate, as they were going out in the carriage from their Club. On 1 May, as Sri Aurobindo was sitting in the office of the *Bande Mataram* in Calcutta, the wire from Muzzaferpore was shown to him. Sri Aurobindo also read in the *Empire* that the Police Commissioner had said that they knew who were in the murder plot, and they would all be arrested without delay. Whatever the provocation caused by men like Kingsford and the bureaucracy whom they represented, the Muzzaferpore bomb-outrage, even had it got at the intended victim, would have proved nothing and solved nothing. But as it actually turned out, it was a ghastly tragedy, a

⁴ Book II, ll 796 ff.

piece of pure terrorist excrescence. And immediately Shyamsundar Chakravarti wrote editorially in the *Bande Mataram*:

Outrages of this kind have absolutely no sanction in our ancient tradition and culture.... Moderatism is imitation of British constitutionalism, this form of so-called Extremism, wherever it may be found to exist in this country, is imitation of European Anarchism; and both are equally different from and absolutely foreign to the spirit of the Nationalism which, though opposed by one and occasionally mistaken for the other, is bound in the long run to carve out the future of India, and realise the eternal destiny of her ancient and composite people.⁵

But — perhaps understandably, yet most unfortunately, under the circumstances — the Government lost their balance and sense of measure, and started arresting persons right and left. The police, of course, fastened their suspicion at once on the young men (whom they had shadowed before) camping at the Manicktolla Gardens.⁶ Khudiram and Prafulla both belonged to this group, and the other members also must have known how things had turned out at Muzzaferpore. Sri Aurobindo too presumably sent word to his brother Barindra, advising him to clear out with his companions after wiping out all traces of their bomb-making activities. Some of the young men remembered that there were two or three rifles with Abinash Bhattacharya in Sri Aurobindo's

⁵ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 10 May 1908.

⁶ "A spy, Rajani Sarkar by name, had gained admittance into the garden as a friend of one of the boys and conveyed information to the police. The police waited till the Muzzaferpore outrage, and then closed in." (C.C. Dutt, in an article in the *Sunday Times*, 17 December 1950).

house, and these were brought back and buried in the Gardens along with the revolvers and bomb-making materials. Some of the group were sent away, and the others tried their best to destroy all their papers and all evidence of their identity and occupation. Tired out at last, they went to bed late at night on 1 May, hoping to get away before daybreak, for they had, earlier in the evening, been suspiciously interrogated by seeming strangers. But they slept a little too long, and they were surprised before dawn by the police. The scene has been etched from memory by one of the young men, Nolini:

Shadowy forms were moving about the place, there was a clatter and a creaking of boots. Suddenly out of the dark silence, a conversation arose:

"You are under arrest. Your name?"

"Barindra Kumar Ghose."

"Arabinda Ghose?"

"No, Barindra Kumar Ghose."

"Well, we'll see."

The next thing I knew was a hand clapping on my shoulders. "Come," said a voice....

.. we were all arrested in a body. The police made us stand in a line under the strict watch of an armed guard. They kept us standing the whole day with hardly anything to eat.... In the evening, the order came, "Follow us". But follow where?... We were taken to the lock-up at the Lal Bazar police station.⁷

They remained there for two days and two nights "herded together like beasts and shut up in a cell". Then they were taken to the Alipur Jail, where they had cooked rice to eat (the first meal in three days),

⁷ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, pp. 22-3; 25.

and "it tasted so nice and sweet that we felt as if we were in heaven".⁸

After Barindra and his companions had been taken away, the Gardens and the house were turned upside down, the weapons and bombs were unearthed, and some important papers — left behind carelessly — were secured. Simultaneously, house-searches were instituted in other places too, and many suspects were taken into custody. On 5 May, Prafulla Chaki was arrested, but he made good his word that he wouldn't live to be tortured by the police and driven to confess any secrets: he pushed the revolver muzzle into his mouth, pressed the trigger with his fingers, and heroically ended his life. Among those arrested was Sushil Sen, whom Kingsford had earlier ordered to be flogged in the open Court. The prosecution against Sri Aurobindo in 1907 had led to a procession and a protest: this had provoked some police action: this had led to Sushil's altercation with a policeman: and this to the flogging of Sushil which, in its turn, to the bomb-attempt on Kingsford: and the misfired attempt to Sushil's arrest (and to Sri Aurobindo's as well) — what a sinister chain-reaction!

There was now a wild leap of speculation, a quick spread of nameless terror; and the situation grew every hour more and more ominous and menacing. As the *Bande Mataram* said, it was the merest affectation to deny that the Muzzaferpore outrage had "created a most critical situation in the country".⁹ It was, perhaps, not wholly unnatural that the panic-stricken authorities should have suspected that Sri Aurobindo — wasn't he the elder brother of Barindra Kumar Ghose? — was also somehow or other connected with the revolutionary organisation,

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 26. ⁹ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 10 May, 1908.

the miniature bomb-factory at the Manicktolla Gardens, and perhaps even with the bomb-throwing at Muzzaferpore. The police had, in fact, expected to surprise Sri Aurobindo at the Gardens, and were disappointed that they had found only Barindra and the smaller fry. In their secret files, the Government had doubtless a detailed *dossier* about Sri Aurobindo, and about a month and a half earlier an unknown gentleman had warned him that some wicked people were conspiring against him and his brother Barindra.¹⁰ After the Muzzaferpore tragedy, the Government decided they would take no more chances. Orders were therefore issued for his immediate arrest. It was a Friday night, and Sri Aurobindo was sleeping peacefully in his first floor room at 48, Grey Street — the office of the *Nava Shakti* — to which he had moved some time earlier from his Scott's Lane residence. At about five in the morning next day (5 May), Sarojini his sister rushed into his room in terror and woke him up. The small room was now filled with armed policemen, some senior officers like Superintendent Craegan, and "red turbans, spies and search witnesses". Pistols in hand, some of them struck heroic attitudes, as if they were out to storm a fortress. It was even reported that "a white hero had aimed a pistol" at Sarojini's heart. Sri Aurobindo was put under arrest, after he had read the search warrant and signed it. Under instructions from Craegan, Sri Aurobindo was handcuffed and a rope was tied round his midriff, and a constable stood behind holding the rope; but about half an hour later, these wanton indignities were removed.

¹⁰ In this section I have drawn liberally upon Sri Aurobindo's *Tales of Prison Life* (authorised English version of his *Kara-Kahm*, published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27, 1968). The reference to the 'unknown gentleman' occurs on p. 124 of the *Annual*.

Abinash Bhattacharya and Sailen Bose were also put under arrest, and (as Sri Aurobindo recorded later in *Kara-Kahini*) Craegan behaved as though "he had entered into the lair of some ferocious animal, as if we were uneducated, wild lawbreakers".¹¹ There was an intermittent passage-at-arms between Craegan and Sri Aurobindo, and when the former asked whether it wasn't shameful for a graduate, an educated man like him, to sleep on the floor of such a poky house, the answer was: "I am a poor man, and I live like one". "So you have worked up all this mischief to become a rich man!" What was the use of trying to explain to that thick-headed lump of insolence the love of the Motherland, the nature of sacrifice or the sublimity of the vow of poverty? Sri Aurobindo did not make the attempt.

The search operations continued from five-thirty to about eleven-thirty. "Search" was not the word for it", was the Reporter's account in the *Bande Mataram*; "it (the bedroom) was turned inside out. The ransacking went on for hours...." Exercise books, letters, poems, scraps, essays, translations, and other papers were seized with avidity and taken away. One of the officers, Clark of 24 Parganas, looked suspiciously at a lump of clay kept in a cardboard box. Perhaps it was a new kind of explosive! Actually the earth had been brought to Sri Aurobindo from Dakshineswar by a young man connected with the Ramakrishna Mission, and Sri Aurobindo's wife, Mrinalini, had preserved it as a sacred relic. Other rooms were also searched, and all kinds of things were seized. A bicycle, an iron safe — they were bodily removed.

At long last, the search came to an end and Sri

¹¹ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 27, p. 121.

Aurobindo was taken to the police station where he had his bath and lunch; and after being made to wait for about two hours at Lal Bazar, he was removed to Royd Street, where he stayed all evening being treated by the detective, Maulvi Shams-ul-Alam, "to a delicious lecture on religion". Under the cover of expatiating on the links between Hinduism and Islam, the Maulvi made a naïve attempt to pump Sri Aurobindo for incriminating information, but of course without success. He was then taken in rain and storm to the lock-up at Lal Bazar and lodged for a while in a room in the company of Sailen Bose who had also been arrested. But presently, on the Police Commissioner Mr. F. L. Halliday's orders, Sailen was removed to another room. Turning to Sri Aurobindo, Halliday put the rhetorical question: "Don't you feel ashamed to have been involved in this dastardly deed?" Sri Aurobindo snapped back: "What right have you to assume that I was involved?" And he added, "I totally deny having had anything to do with this murder". And Mr. Halliday kept silent.

The arrest of Sri Aurobindo — not the event alone, but even more, the manner in which the arrest had been made, the handcuffing and the other atrocities and humiliations — created a mighty sensation in the whole country. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* asked editorially:

But why were they (Sri Aurobindo and others) pounced upon in this mysterious manner, handcuffed, and then dragged before the Police Commissioner? Where was the necessity for this outrage.... It served no other purpose than that of wantonly outraging public feeling.¹²

¹² It is not known why, having handcuffed Sri Aurobindo and tied him with a rope round his waist, the police officers had these removed after

Besides Sri Aurobindo and Barindra, over thirty others had also been promptly rounded up — and more were to follow in the coming days — in connection with the Muzzaferpore outrage, the bomb-factory at Manicktolla Gardens, and the supposed wide-spread revolutionary conspiracy of which these were apparently but the startling first symptoms.

The next day (Sunday) was spent by Sri Aurobindo in the lock-up — some of the boys arrested at the Manicktolla Gardens had been brought there too. On being presented on Monday before the Commissioner, Sri Aurobindo, Abinash Bhattacharya and Sailen Bose declined to make a formal statement, having already had some experience of legal procedures and quibblings. Nolini Kanta Gupta told Mr. Halliday that "he was oblivious of the reason for which he was charged". Barindra and some others, however, seem to have made a fairly full confession after their arrest, but only "with a view to save the party by the sacrifice of some of its members" (in other words, themselves). It was a deliberate attempt at self-sacrifice "so that, instead of all of us dying together, some might still live on to carry the work forward".¹³ Actually, this move didn't quite succeed, since most of those connected with the business were arrested and tried together.¹⁴

some time. Was it because of the protest of Bhupendranath Basu, the Congress Moderate leader, who had come to see things for himself when he heard about the arrest? Or was it on the intervention of Benod Kumar Gupta, as claimed by him? (*Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 27, p.122).

¹³ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Cf. C.C. Dutt: "The Chief and a number of young men were arrested and put up for trial. The idea of a second line of defence came more or less to nought. But fresh people took up the work and carried it on. They wore different guises, uttered different slogans, but they moved forward

Next day (Tuesday) Sri Aurobindo and the other prisoners were produced before Mr. T. Thornhill, Chief Presidency Magistrate, and the prosecution tried to make capital out of the fact that Sri Aurobindo was one of the proprietors of the Gardens where the bombs had been manufactured. On a point of right jurisdiction, Thornhill transferred the case to the Court of the District Magistrate at Alipur. Sri Aurobindo, along with a few others, was now taken in a carriage to the Alipur Court, and from there to the Alipur jail. An unknown gentleman told Sri Aurobindo that, as he was likely to be placed in solitary confinement, if he had any message to send to his people, he might make use of him (the speaker). "I am mentioning this fact", writes Sri Aurobindo in his prison memoirs, "as an example of my countrymen's sympathy and unsought kindness towards me".¹⁵ The prisoners were permitted to bathe, and after being clothed in jail uniforms, each was taken to the cell assigned to him; "the bath, after four days, was heavenly bliss.... I, too, entered my lonely cell. The doors closed, and my prison life at Alipur began.... Next year, on 6 May, I was released".

steadfastly towards the goal. And the goal was achieved in God's own time" (*Sunday Times*, 17 December 1950). While C. C. Dutt makes it appear that he took an important part in the revolutionary and terrorist movements from behind the scenes under the leadership of his "Chief," Sri Aurobindo, there is perhaps some romanticising in all this. When the talk once (28 February 1940) turned on C. C. Dutt's role and activities, Sri Aurobindo is reported to have said. "Charu Dutt seems to be everywhere. Yet I never knew that he was actually in the movement" (Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Part II, p. 243) Again: "Dutt seems to have a strong imagination. He can't be entrusted with writing my biography" (p. 192).

¹⁵ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 27, p. 126.

II

The "Alipur Case" — or the Manicktolla Bomb-Factory Case — or the Muzzaferpore Bomb Outrage Case as it came to be variously called was the talk of the whole country for the next twelve months and more. Reactions of particular groups of people followed predictable lines. The Moderates unhesitatingly deplored the outrage but were guardedly anxious about the fate of Sri Aurobindo whom they could not fail to respect from a distance. The Nationalists deplored the event too, but also blamed the Government for unleashing a campaign of repression that alone had provoked such acts of terrorism, useless as they might be and even meriting condemnation. The Anglo-Indian community in India felt a shiver and exhorted the Government to take the sternest possible action against the offenders and to prevent the recurrence of such acts of infamy. The revolutionaries who had escaped arrest lay low for a while containing their anger. Jatindranath Mukherjee (Bagha Jatin) was one of the revolutionaries who had managed to escape arrest, and somehow tried to keep the organisation going. As for the bureaucracy, their overwhelming concern was with Sri Aurobindo. He was the core, he was the superbrain, he was the heart and soul of the whole movement of Nationalism and the whole underground revolutionary organisation. The superlatively cunning creature had at last been caught and caged; and woe unto the bureaucracy if he should now be allowed to escape!

There were, perhaps, hesitations in high quarters whether it would be altogether wise to press the prosecution against a man so brilliant — a man admittedly

endowed with such high intellectual and moral qualities — as Sri Aurobindo. Especially when there was so little direct evidence to connect him either with the diminutive bomb-factory or with the killing of the two ladies at Muzzaferpore. To set those feeble hesitations at rest, Mr. E. A. Gait, the Chief Secretary of Bengal, affirmed in his report to the Home Secretary of the Government of India on 16 May 1908:

Of Arabinda's connection with the secret society we have little direct evidence, the reason being that, here as in the case of the editorship of the paper (the reference here is to the *Bande Mataram* case of the previous year), he has been careful to avoid doing anything which would enable any charge to be proved against him. There is, however, no real doubt as to his being intimately connected with it.... The Lieutenant-Governor (of Bengal) has no doubt whatever on this point, nor has he any doubt that his is the master mind at the back of the whole extremist campaign in Bengal.... The conviction of the other persons concerned would be of no avail if Arabinda were set free; for, in that case he would lose no time in starting a fresh conspiracy, and the work now done would be altogether in vain.... In the interest of peace and good government, it is absolutely necessary that this man should be removed from the political arena".¹⁶

¹⁶ Quoted from Government of India's Home Department Proceedings for May 1908, Nos. 104-11, in Haridas & Uma Mukherjee's *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics*, xii (footnote). The Lt. Governor, Andrew Fraser, also wrote on the same day to the same effect to Minto: "He (Arabinda Ghose) is the ring leader. He is able, cunning, fanatical. But he has kept himself, like a careful and valued General, out of sight of 'the enemy'" (Quoted from Minto Papers in

This is a very remarkable document indeed, with a down-to-earth Machiavellian frankness about it! The Chief Secretary had no doubt and the Lieutenant-Governor had no doubt that Sri Aurobindo "should be removed from the political arena", with or without convincing evidence — if necessary even without the formalities of normal legal procedure. It was always possible to invoke the provisions of the Bengal State Prisoners Regulation III of 1818, under which Government were empowered to seize and remove from the scene anybody they thought inconvenient or undesirable. What happened at Muzzaferpore came handy, it was something of a godsend to the Government, for even without that bomb-action Sri Aurobindo was clearly a marked man and would have sooner or later found himself spirited away by a recourse to that infamous Regulation of 1818.

If Muzzaferpore thus helped Government to make up their mind quickly and arrest Sri Aurobindo and convey him to the Alipur jail, these happenings also gave a decisive turn to his life and transformed, by a process of unbelievable alchemy, the solitary cell into a spiritual retreat and cave of *sādhana*. As Sri Aurobindo later wrote in his *Kara-Kahini* ('Tales of Prison Life'):

At that time I had no idea that I happened to be the main target of suspicion and that according to the police I was the chief killer, the instigator and secret leader of the young terrorists and revolutionaries. I did not know that that day would mean the end of a chapter of my life, and that there stretched before me a year's imprisonment during which period all my human relationships would

cease, that for a whole year I would have to live beyond the pale of society, like an animal in a cage. And when I would re-enter the world of activity it would not be the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose. Rather it would be a new being, a new character, intellect, life, mind, embarking upon a new course of action that would come out of the ashram at Alipur.... For long I had made great efforts for a direct vision (*sāksāt darśan*) of the the Lord of my Heart; had entertained the immense hope of knowing the Preserver of the world, the Supreme Person (Purushottama) as friend and master. But due to the pull of a thousand worldly desires, attachment towards numerous activities, the deep darkness of ignorance, I did not succeed in that effort. At long last the most merciful all-good Lord (*Shiva Hari*) destroyed all these enemies at one stroke and helped me in my path, pointed to the *yogāśram*, Himself staying as Guru and companion in my little abode of retirement and spiritual discipline.... The only result of the wrath of the British Government was that I found God.¹⁷

But this of course the Government couldn't know, and certainly it wouldn't ever have come into their calculations. They had got their man, and they wished to see he didn't escape the legal net this time, as he had done adroitly the previous year. The most eminent criminal lawyer at the time in India, Mr. Eardley Norton, then at the dizzy peak of his powers and reputation, was engaged by the Government to conduct the prosecution. It was therefore necessary to organise the defence of Sri Aurobindo on a reasonably efficient basis. His sister,

¹⁷ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27, p. 120.

Sarojini Devi, accordingly made the following fervent appeal for funds:

My countrymen are aware that my brother Aravinda Ghose stands accused of a grave offence. But I believe, and I have reason to think that the vast majority of my countrymen believe, that he is quite innocent. I think if he is defended by an able counsel he is sure to be acquitted.... I know all my countrymen do not hold the same political opinions as he. But I feel some delicacy in saying that probably there are few Indians who do not appreciate his great attainments, his self-sacrifice, his single-minded devotion to the country's cause and the high spirituality of his character. This emboldens me, a woman, to stand before every son and daughter of India for help to defend a brother, — my brother and theirs too.¹⁸

This moving appeal, wrung from a sister's heart, was eloquently supported by the *Bengalee*, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and other leading papers. Response to the appeal was not very slow in coming; and it came — as it often does — from the most unexpected places. A blind beggar — all deathless honour to him! — gave Sarojini one rupee out of the alms he had assiduously collected over a period of months; an impecunious student, by denying himself his daily tiffin, gave a modest contribution; the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha bestirred itself to make collections for the Sri Aurobindo Defence Fund.¹⁹ And numerous other institutions and individuals and agencies — spread all over the country — also interested themselves in the matter, and a steady stream of support, psychological as well as financial, started

¹⁸ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 13 June 1908. ¹⁹ *ibid.*, 26 July 1908.

pouring in. In spite of all this fund of general goodwill in the country, the actual amount collected was by no means very impressive at first, for after two months hardly Rs. 23,000 had been put together. In those early weeks, the significant achievement was the rebuff administered to the Government, for they could now have no doubt that the people were with the supposed "criminal" and not with the prosecuting alien bureaucracy who were only the object of universal detestation. Nay more: contributions and messages of sympathy came even from Europe, from Australia, from America — and the bureaucracy felt isolated from civilised opinion and was left to fend for itself somehow.

Meanwhile the preliminary trial started in Alipur before Mr. L. Birley, the Officiating District Magistrate, on 19 May, a fortnight after Sri Aurobindo's arrest. Bail had been refused to the accused, and all of them were charged under Sections 121-A, 122, 123 and 124 of the Indian Penal Code for "organising a gang for the purpose of waging war against the Government by means of criminal force". Even the preliminary trial was a tortuous process. The intended victim of the Muzzaferpore bomb-attack, Mr. Kingsford, in his evidence before Mr. Birley said with a breezy statistical complacency:

I was Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta, from August 1904 to March 1908. I had to try many sedition cases... I acquitted as many as I convicted.

The preliminary trial, a protracted affair, went on from 19 May to 19 August, when Mr. Birley framed charges at last and committed the accused to sessions. It was a macabre business, and Sri Aurobindo thought that he and his fellow-accused were sitting, not in a British

Court of Justice, but in a world of fiction or fantasy. Of the prosecuting counsel, Mr. Norton, Sri Aurobindo has left a vivid sketch, which almost skins alive that once roaring hero of a hundred judicial theatres:

The star performer of the show was the government counsel, Mr. Norton. Not only the star performer, but he was also its composer, stage manager and prompter... he certainly was the king among beasts at the Alipur court....

Of the three kinds of great lawyers — the subtle legal analysts, the cunning cross-examiners of witnesses, and the loud-mouthed bullies — Norton was the foremost in the third category. No use criticising him, for that was, after all, his *svabhava*! And his *svadharma* was to earn his daily fee of one thousand rupees by trying to win the case for the Government by hook or by crook. And what an adroit creative genius he was, almost a sort of Shakespeare:

And Mr. Norton happened to be the Shakespeare of this play... (he) never allowed any material, true or false, cogent or irrelevant, from the smallest to the largest, to go unused; on top of it he could create such a wonderful plot by his self-created and abundant imagination, inference and hypothesis that the great poets and writers of fiction like Shakespeare and Defoe would have to acknowledge defeat before this grand master of the art... just as Falstaff's hotel bill showed a penny-worth of bread and countless gallons of wine, similarly in Norton's plot "an ounce of proof was mixed with tons of inference and suggestion"....

If Norton was a creative genius, his epic needed a hero or villain — and Sri Aurobindo was cast for that role.

Like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in Mr. Norton's plot at the centre of the mighty rebellion stood I, an extraordinarily sharp, intelligent and powerful, bold, bad man! Of the National movement I was the alpha and the omega, its creator and saviour, engaged in undermining the British Empire. As soon as he came across any piece of excellent or vigorous English, he would jump and loudly proclaim, Aurobindo Ghose!... It is a pity I was not born as an Avatar, otherwise thanks to his intense devotion and ceaseless contemplation of me for the nonce, he would surely have earned his release, *mukti*, then and there....

When some of the witnesses deposed contrary to the requirements of his Poem, Norton "would grow red with fury and, roaring like a lion, he would strike terror in the heart of the witness and cower him down". He lost his temper equally whenever the defence counsel, Bhuban Chatterji, raised objections or points of order. As for the Magistrate, Mr. Birley, he was content to follow Norton's lead: "he laughed when Norton laughed, grew angry as Norton went angry". Sri Aurobindo clinches the double-portrait with the remark: "Because such a counsel had been matched with a magistrate of the same calibre, the case had all the more taken on the proportions of a play".²⁰

There were, then, among the numerous "minor characters" the different categories of witnesses. the police and the secret service men; the men eager to please the police; and the people dragged unwillingly to give evidence. The method of examination and cross-examination followed by Norton struck Sri Aurobindo as very perverse

²⁰ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27, pp. 143-7.

and foolish and utterly wasteful:

This sort of method for conducting cases is possible perhaps only in India.... Hauling hundreds of witnesses, gathered on a basis of guesswork, and without enquiring whether one was guilty or not, wasting the country's finances and keeping without any sense the accused for long periods under the hardships of prison life — it is worthy only of the police force of this country.²¹

As for the methods of identification, the less said the better. Two police officers declared on oath that they had seen Charuchandra Roy of Chandernagore at Shyambazar on a particular day; but on that day and at that hour, he has been talking with the Mayor of Chandernagore and other important people at the Howrah railway station, and these were willing to depose in his favour. Charu Roy had to be released on a representation by the French Government, but the other accused — some of them equally innocent — were not so lucky. Commenting on this and other features of the trial, Sri Aurobindo wrote later in *Kara-Kahini*:

On the whole, during this trial at every stage I could find, in the British legal system, how easily the innocent could be punished, sent to prison, suffer transportation, even loss of life. Unless one stood in the dock oneself, one cannot realise the delusive untruth of the Western penal code. It is something of a gamble, a gamble with human freedom, with man's joys and sorrows, a life-long agony for him and his family, his friends and relatives, insult, a living death. In this system there is no counting as to how often guilty persons escape

²¹ *ibid.*, 27, p. 149.

and how many innocent persons perish... if society has to be preserved with the aid of so much sin and suffering, the burning sighs of the innocent and their heart's blood, its preservation would seem unnecessary.²²

III

What were Sri Aurobindo's feelings when he found himself suddenly checkmated, torn from society, and thrown into solitary confinement? What did he think, how did he feel, in what manner did he bear the rigours of the imprisonment — the bad food, the prison clothes, the lack of books and journals, the want of light and free air, and, above all, the creeping solitariness of the gloomy nine by five feet windowless dungeon that was now his Ashram, his Sadhanalaya — his living tomb — in the worthy Government Guest House or Hotel at Ali-pur?

SRI Aurobindo has answered our questions in some detail, and he has done so using language that often acquires wings, and wafts us to the seventh heaven of radiant ecstasy and hope incommensurable. His Bengali work of reminiscences, *Kara-Kahini*, has been referred to already, and there is also his English Messianic speech at Uttarpa, and both belong to the period immediately after his release from prison a year later. In the early days of his life in the gloomy cell, he had indeed been subjected to a refinement of torture; and he had first to achieve, as a result of his long and desperate struggle with thirst and nausea, effective freedom from them. In

²² *ibid*, p. 151.

that furnace that was his cell, he was given two coarse jail-made rugs as a makeshift bedding — he spread one on the floor and rolled the other into a sort of pillow. He had often to roll on the bare ground to cool his body when the heat became unbearable, and he found the touch of Mother Earth so much more soothing than the embrace of the rugs. When the rains came, the cell would be flooded with water, dirt, leaves and straw, and he had to snuggle to a corner for the night.

As for the “fittings”, there was a versatility about them. The plate and the bowl were expected to serve in a variety of ways, especially the all-sufficient bowl:

Among inert objects it was like the British civilian. Just as the civilian, *ipso facto*, is fit and able to undertake any administrative duty, be it as judge, magistrate, police, revenue officer, chairman of municipality, professor, preacher, whatever you ask him to do he can become at your merest saying, — just as for him to be an investigator, complainant, police magistrate, even at times to be the counsel for defence, all these roles hold a friendly concourse in the same hospitable body, my dear bowl was equally multi-purpose. The bowl was free from all caste restrictions, beyond discrimination....

Where else could I find such an aid and preceptor to get rid of the sense of disgust?²³

Sri Aurobindo and the others hadn't yet been tried, nor found guilty; they were in prison on suspicion. Even so, they were herded together like thieves and dacoits, and kept “like animals in a cage”, given food unfit for animals, and made to endure water scarcity, thirst and hunger, sun, rain and cold! But Sri Aurobindo himself

²³ *ibid.*, p. 127.

didn't mind it at all; rather he learned to welcome this abnormal communal life, as he had loved at the time of the Surat Congress to travel by train in the third class and to camp with the delegates, eating and sleeping together in a "wonderful feeling of brotherhood". The lesson in communal life went a further stage at the Alipur jail:

During my stay... I ate, lived, went through the same hardships and enjoyed the same privileges with the other convicts, my fellow nationals, the peasants, iron-monger, potter, the *doms* and the *bagdis*, and I could learn that the Lord who dwells in every body, this socialism and unity, this nation-wide brotherhood had put its stamp on my life's dedication ...²⁴

The shift from the Lal Bazar lock-up to the solitary cell at Alipur was nevertheless welcome, and since Sri Aurobindo had faith in God, even the loneliness did not prey upon him. The food of course was atrocious — "coarse rice spiced with husk, pebbles, insects, hair, dirt and other such stuff" — being tasteless as well as lacking any nutritive value whatsoever. Boiled rice itself was a trinity — appearing now in its Wisdom (Shiva) aspect as white, now in its Hiranyagarbha aspect as yellow stuff, and again in its Virat Purusha aspect of grey eminence. But that life too was bearable, for after all God gave the sufferers the strength to bear even that life. In answer to a Poona editor trying to raise a laugh over this "excess of Godwardness in prison", Sri Aurobindo wrote in *Kara-Kahini*:

Alas for the pride and littleness of men.... The manifestation of God, should it not be in prison,

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 130

in huts, ashrams, in the heart of the poor, but rather in the temples of luxury of the rich or the bed of repose of pleasure-seeking selfish folk? God does not look for learning, honour, leadership, popular acclaim, outward ease and sophistication. To the poor He reveals Himself in the form of the Compassionate Mother. He who sees the Lord in all men, in all nations, in his own land, in the miserable, the poor, the fallen and the sinner and offers his life in the service of the Lord, the Lord comes to such hearts....²⁵

Subjected to a thousand indignities, privations, jeers, insults, was it not surprising that the prisoners could yet find restful sleep at night:

It is the time when the weak of heart weeps over his misfortune or in anticipation of the hardships of prison life. The lover of God feels the nearness of his deity, and has the joy of his prayer or meditation in the silent night. Then to these three thousand creatures who came from God, victims of a miserable social system, the huge instrument of torture, the Alipur jail, is lost in a vast silence.²⁶

The hardships hurt at first, but in the beginning Sri Aurobindo learnt to tolerate them, then to ignore them, and finally to become wholly immune to them. The mind was able to soar above them, even to laugh at them; there could be no anger now, nor resentment; 'twas a Divinity that had shaped the ends, and regrets were wholly out of place.

After the first few difficult and dreary days, Sri Aurobindo was permitted to obtain his clothes and

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 130. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 133.

books from home. He accordingly requested his maternal uncle, Krishna Kumar Mitra the editor of the *Sanjivani*, to send him these — notably the *Gita* and the *Upanishads*. It was during that terrible interregnum, when he was cooped up in total loneliness and normal human supports were taken away, that he was able to gauge what effect such solitary confinement could have even on healthy or intelligent people: how such monstrous isolation might — unless God's Grace stood sentinel by one's side — drive one to distraction and lunacy.

There was the other side of the medal too, for there were not wanting officers — like Emerson the Jail Superintendent, Dr. Daly the prison physician and Baidyanath Chatterji the assistant doctor — who were polite, considerate and kindly. There was also a change for the better in the outer circumstances of Sri Aurobindo's life. Dr. Daly — “a gentleman and a most judicious person” — started visiting Sri Aurobindo in his cell daily, along with the Assistant Jail Superintendent, and there was some attempt at conversation; it was largely an one-sided affair though, for Sri Aurobindo was but a listener most of the time, and merely answered their queries. One day Dr. Daly informed Sri Aurobindo that he would be given permission to have a constitutional outside his cell, both in the morning and in the evening.²⁷ This freedom, which enabled Sri Aurobindo to walk between the jail workshop and the cowshed for anything from ten minutes to two hours, was most welcome, and Sri Aurobindo on those occasions used to recite the soul-stirring verses from the *Upanishads* or the *Gita*, to watch the other inmates of the prison engaged in their work, to realise the basic truth of the imma-

²⁷ *ibid*, p 140.

nent Godhead, *All this is Brahman*. But already an inner change was taking place, and it had its effects on his outer experiences as well. We cannot do better than read the Uttarpa speech of over a year later when he took a backward glance at his prison days and reviewed the changes in his mental climate from "dark, dark... irrecoverably dark, total eclipse of day" through the tunnel of grim indifference and acceptance and out into the glory and brightness of a Divine morn when the whole world was seen bathed in His translucent light:

When I was arrested and hurried to the Lal Bazar *hājat*, I was shaken in faith for a while, for I could not look into the heart of His intention. Therefore I faltered for a moment and cried out in my heart to Him, "What is this that has happened to me? I believed that I had a mission to work for the people of my country and until that work was done, I should have Thy protection. Why then am I here and on such a charge?" A day passed and a second day and a third, when a voice came to me from within, "Wait and see". Then I grew calm and waited, I was taken from Lal Bazar to Alipur, and was placed for one month in a solitary cell apart from men. There I waited night and day for the voice of God within me, to know what He had to say to me, to learn what I had to do. In this seclusion the earliest realisation, the first lesson came to me.²⁸

He then remembered how, a month or more before his arrest, an inner call had come to him to put aside all activity — to go into seclusion and look within — so that he might enter into closer communion with Him. On that occasion, however, Sri Aurobindo had been too weak

²⁸ *Speeches*, pp 54-5.

to resist the pull of the outside world, and he had therefore desisted from listening to that voice; politics and poetry were too dear to him, and he could not give them up completely. Had he not, indeed, told Lele that he, Sri Aurobindo, would follow the path of Yoga only if it did not interfere with his politics and his poetry? So long as he was a free man, Sri Aurobindo would not break the bonds himself — and therefore God, in his own utterly inscrutable manner, had to do it for him. God now seemed to whisper to Sri Aurobindo in the infinite loneliness of the prison cell:

*The bonds you had not the strength to break, I have broken for you, because it is not my will nor was it ever my intention that that should continue. I have had another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here, to teach you what you could not learn for yourself and to train you for my work.*²⁹

In the vast and sombre stillness of the dungeon, the admonition and the exhortation seemed to insinuate their meaning into his disturbed heart, and it was as though he was enacting the inner spiritual drama so disturbingly described by T. S. Eliot:

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy...

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession.

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not.³⁰

Sri Aurobindo had in the meantime secured his books, — the Upanishads and the Gita. As he began reading the *Gita*, the Lord's strength entered into him, and he

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 55. ³⁰ *Four Quartets* (1944), p. 20.

was able to do the *sādhana* prescribed in the Book. He had already over a period of years tried to seize the true inwardness and glory of the Indian religious and spiritual tradition, the *philosophia perennis* of the Sana-tana Dharma, and intellectually to accept it in its entirety; now it all became, not only a matter of thrilling comprehension, but a fact of minutely intimate realisation. For one thing, there was the stupendous lesson and ineffable experience of Love. As he wrote in the *Kara-Kahini*:

The prisoners in the neighbouring cowshed would take out in front of my room the cows for grazing. Both cow and cowherd were daily and delightful sights. The solitary confinement at Alipur was a unique lesson in love. Before coming here, even in society my affections were confined to a rather narrow circle, and the closed emotions would rarely include birds and animals.... At Alipur I could feel how deep could be the love of man for all created things, how thrilled a man could be on seeing a cow, a bird, even an ant.⁸¹

Sri Aurobindo also saw by direct illumination the eternal truth of what Sri Krishna had demanded of Arjuna, and what He still demands of all those who wish to be counted among His true servants, — “to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands, to have an

⁸¹ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 27, p. 131. A few pages later, Sri Aurobindo describes how, when he found a horde of big black ants killing a group of tiny red ants, he “felt an intense charity and sympathy for these unjustly treated red ants and tried to save them from the black killers” (p. 138)

equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do His work negligently".³² The constant reading and re-reading of the *Gita*, and ceaseless pondering on its undying truths, made it possible for him at last to seize in an act of undivided attention "the core of the *Gita's* teaching", and now the Song of Songs seemed to tell him in friendly insinuating yet marvellously compelling words:

Desire and the passions that arise from desire are the principal sign and knot of ego.... Desire is the chief enemy of spiritual perfection. Slay then desire; put away attachment to the possession and enjoyment of the outwardness of things. Separate yourself from all that comes to you as outward touches and solicitations, as objects of the mind and senses. Learn to bear and reject all the rush of the passions and to remain securely seated in your inner self even while they rage in your members, until at last they cease to affect any part of your nature. Bear and put away similarly the forceful attacks and even the slightest insinuating touches of joy and sorrow. Cast away liking and disliking, destroy preference and hatred, root out shrinking and repugnance. Let there be a calm indifference to these things and to all the objects of desire in all your nature. Look on them with the silent and tranquil regard of an impersonal spirit.³³

The doubts — the few that had persisted yet in prison — were now a thing of the past; Sri Aurobindo's soul already experienced a calm and rich lucidity. He was now able, while mentally repeating the *mantra* that all was

³² *Speeches*, pp. 55-6.

³³ *Essays on the Gita* (Centre of Education Edition), 1959, pp. 792-4.

Brahman, all was Vasudeva — *Sarvam khalvidam brahma, Vāsudevah sarvamiti* — to project that realisation upon everything and every creature in the range of his daily experience. The prison ceased to be a prison. As he opened his wondering eyes, it was an apocalyptic vision that he saw:

...it was while I was walking that His strength again entered into me. I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me his shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover. This was the first use of the deeper vision He gave me. I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.³⁴

Some of the prisoners were but thieves and dacoits, yet how good and how human they seemed to be, how well they seemed to be able to triumph over the adverse circumstances of jail life, how unconsciously they seemed to demonstrate that "sweet are the uses of adversity"! There was, in particular, an alleged dacoit sentenced to

³⁴ *Speeches*, pp. 56-7.

ten years' rigorous imprisonment, but to Sri Aurobindo he seemed a saint. As a result of these insights and illuminations, a transcendent peace now possessed Sri Aurobindo's mind and heart, and all was incomparable peace within. This singular immaculate inner equanimity and this miraculous gift of mystical vision helped him to see in the lower court—as in the sessions court as well—all the actors clothed in the garment of Narayana, of Vasudeva:

I looked and it was not the Magistrate whom I saw, it was Vasudeva, it was Narayana who was sitting there on the bench. I looked at the Prosecuting Counsel... it was Sri Krishna who sat there, it was my Lover and Friend who sat there and smiled. "Now do you fear?" He said; "I am in all men and I overrule their actions and their words.

My protection is still with you....³⁵

Incarceration and trial, then, far from breaking Sri Aurobindo, only re-made him in the hallowed mould of God's desire. The prison did not cramp his movements, but proved rather a temple of liberation and fulfilment. As he recapitulated this blissful experience in *Kara-Kahini*:

The high wall, those iron bars, the white wall, the green-leaved tree shining in the sunlight, it seemed as if these commonplace objects were not unconscious at all, but that they were vibrating with a universal consciousness, they loved me and wished to embrace me, or so I felt. Men, cows, ants, birds are moving, flying, singing, speaking, yet all is Nature's game; behind all this is a great pure detached spirit rapt in a serene delight. Once in a

³⁵ *ibid.*, p 58.

while it seemed as if God Himself was standing under the tree, to play upon His Flute of Delight; and with its sheer charm to draw my very soul out. Always it seemed as if someone was embracing me, holding me on one's lap. The manifestation of these emotions overpowered my whole body and mind, a pure and wide peace reigned everywhere....³⁶

There was now neither peril nor shortcoming, but only the soul's utter joy and freedom; and even when he inhabited but an area of about forty-five square feet, he sensed the splendours of the Infinite and learned to lose himself in the "vastness of God".

IV

While thus a great peace reigned within and overflowed without, the preliminary trial went on its meandering course. At first Sri Aurobindo hardly met any of his co-accused. It was at an identification parade in the jail that he first chanced upon his brother, Barindra, after his arrest. It was at a parade too that one Nagendranath Gossain (Goswami) thrust himself upon Sri Aurobindo's attention. Fit and fat and tall and fair, "his eyes spoke of evil propensities". He claimed that his father was clever and influential enough to get him acquitted. After the trial began in the lower court on 19 May, the prisoners found some time to converse, either in the prison van or at tiffin time; otherwise they were kept in separate cells. There were jokes and pleasantries when they were thus occasionally thrown together, but Sri Aurobindo himself was

³⁶ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27, p. 141.

generally taciturn. Gossain, however, would try to edge towards him, and try to make him talk, sometimes popping very suspicious questions. It was now found that the egregious Shams-ul-Alam was occasionally holding secret conversations with Gossain. Soon Gossain himself began saying with some bravado that he was being coaxed by the police to turn "King's approver" but that he was really trying to hoodwink them. On the other hand, his mind had by now become an open book to the other accused, and they were not a little apprehensive as to what he might do. And when he did give evidence at last, their fears proved only too true.

Whether it was on Dr. Daly's recommendation (as was likely) or at Gossain's suggestion (as he claimed), the prisoners were permitted to live together in the prison — a change not altogether to Sri Aurobindo's liking with his recently acquired taste for solitariness, but which facilitated Gossain's task of moving about and gathering "information". During this period of his stay with the others in a large room, Sri Aurobindo had plenty of opportunities of observing his companions in adversity. Most of them were strangers to him, but he was delighted to see the leaping light in their eyes and their general buoyancy of temperament:

Looking at these lads... one felt as if the liberal, daring, puissant men of an earlier age with a different training had come back to India. That fearless and innocent look in their eyes, the words breathing power, their carefree delighted laughter, even in the midst of great danger the undaunted courage, cheerfulness of mind, absence of despair, or grief, all this was a symptom, not of the inert Indians of those days, but of a new age, a new race and

a new activity. If these were murderers, then one must say that the bloody shadow of killing had not fallen across their nature, in which there was nothing at all of cruelty, recklessness or bestiality... they passed their days in prison with boyish fun, laughter, games, reading and discussions. Quite early they had made friends with everyone... while the trial was going on, and the fate of thirty or forty accused persons was being wrangled over, whose result might be hanging or transportation for life, some of the accused persons without as much as glancing at what was happening around them, were absorbed in reading the novels of Bankimchandra, Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* or *Science of Religions*, or the Gita, the Puranas, or European Philosophy.³⁷

As for the way Sri Aurobindo's unruffled demeanour struck the boys, we have the testimony of one of them, Upendranath Bandyopadhyaya, as recorded in his book of reminiscences in Bengali:

Arabinda would also keep his corner and get lost in his spiritual meditations. Even the hell of the noise that the musical boys made did never disturb or affect him. In the afternoons, he would pace up and down the room, and read the Upanishads or such holy things...³⁸

They noticed certain changes even in Sri Aurobindo's physical appearance. Although he used no oil, his hair looked shiny, as if it drew fat from the body itself. Once his eyes were set like glass-balls. When one of the boys mustered enough courage to ask him whether he

³⁷ *ibid*, pp. 151-2.

³⁸ English version quoted from Sisirkumar Mitra's *The Liberator* (Jaico), p. 130.

had got anything out of his spiritual practices, Sri Aurobindo merely answered, "Why, my boy, the thing I looked for!" He had looked for God, and he had seen Him, and he was seeing Him all the time! To queries about the probable outcome of the case, Sri Aurobindo seems to have replied that he would be acquitted, and that, in fact, *all* their lives would be spared.³⁹

There were also certain other encounters and experiences. Sir Edward Baker, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, after a visit to the Alipur Jail where he happened to see Sri Aurobindo, told Charu Chandra Dutt: "Have you seen Arabinda Ghose's eyes? He has the eyes of a mad man!", and Dutt had to take great pains to convince Sir Edward that Arabinda wasn't mad at all but was really a true Karma Yogi.⁴⁰ There was a more portentous encounter when a Scotch Warder gave an insolent push to Sri Aurobindo when he was about to enter his cell. The boys around naturally got very much excited and might have exploded into violence, but Sri Aurobindo arrested it by giving the miscreant such a look that he instantaneously fled, burned within by the communicated fire of anger. The Jailor presently came upon the scene and, on things being explained to him, pacified everybody and said while going, "We have each to bear our cross".⁴¹

Of some interest is Sri Aurobindo's experience of fasting once for a period of eleven days in the Alipur Jail. He was able to go through this "ordeal" (as it is usually called) without any great inconvenience, except that he lost ten pounds in weight during the period; and when he terminated the fast, he started taking the usual food again. Sri Aurobindo had also on one occasion the

³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 130-1. ⁴⁰ Purani, *Life*, pp. 141-2. ⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 141.

experience of the phenomenon known as "levitation". It was for him a time of intense Sadhana on the vital plane, and at the very moment he asked himself, "Are such things possible?", he found his body raised against the wall without any muscular exertion on his part — only a tip of the body being in slight contact with the ground, and the rest remaining as if suspended precariously!⁴²

There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

An even more significant experience was the sudden opening of a new frontier of his consciousness, — a keen and infallible sensitiveness to painting and sculpture. He was meditating in his cell, and he saw — perhaps with his mind's eye — some pictures, some shapes, on the wall, and it was as though an "Open Sesame!" had thrown the casements open to reveal the splendours in the firmaments of colour, line and form. Was the prison cell, not merely a sanctuary, but a School of Art as well?

Once Sri Aurobindo had come out of the transient Dark and confronted the New Light of Divine Omnipresence, he knew he was beyond the slings and stabs of prison deprivations, bureaucratic perversity and the excruciation of legal proceedings. The sea of silence that had lain under the surface of his consciousness and held him in its vast supernal peace since the day he had stumbled upon it in the upstairs room of Sardar Mazumdar's house at Baroda six months earlier, — it was still there. The great Bass — the immaculate *śruti* — of the music of his life continued as before. But, after the blissful experience of Narayana Darshan in the Alipur

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 143.

Jail, it was as though a thousand little beautiful ships plied on the sea, it was as though numberless notes swelled and swayed and resounded and reverberated making melodies that charmed the human soul to inhabit the Life Heavens. It was not as though Sri Aurobindo had — by his ready response to love, to beauty, to the grandeur of God in everything — it was not as though Sri Aurobindo had lapsed into worldliness or this-worldliness, that he had tamely surrendered to the attachments, blandishments and entanglements of the world of *samsāra*, the deceptive realm of the dichotomies and dualities. The sea of silence was not lost: the *śrūti* had not snapped — it was not the stirring of the senses, it was the witness-spirit that was now seeing and recognising the truth behind the appearances, the multiplicity of the phenomenal world in their innate God-suffused magnificence. This was really the upper hemisphere of knowledge — the hemisphere of Divine manifestation — and was only complementary to the lower hemisphere of knowledge, the arc of immutigable Nirvanic calm. As Sri Aurobindo explained later:

This is the integral knowledge, for we know that everywhere and in all conditions all to the eye that sees is One, to a divine experience all is one block of the Divine. It is only the mind which for the temporary convenience of its own thought and aspiration seeks to cut an artificial line of rigid division.... The liberated knower lives and acts in the world not less than the bound soul and ignorant mind but more,... only with a true knowledge and a greater conscient power. And by so doing he does not forfeit the supreme unity. .. For the Supreme, however hidden now to us, is here in the world no

less than he could be in the most utter and ineffable self-extinction, the most intolerant Nirvana.⁴³

The splendid monotony of the blue sky and the gorgeous orange skies of the evening are both valid images of Reality!

V

Although the bunch of lads accused in the case along with him appeared in Sri Aurobindo's eyes to be a new type of children growing on the Mother's lap, it was the compulsion of fatality that every fine flock should have its black sheep, every Eden its serpent. The young men realised that it was necessary to hush up Judas-Gossain before he could do more mischief, and accordingly one of his fellow accused pretended to want to turn approver too, supplied Gossain with false information which he duly transmitted to the police and made them run many a fool's errand. There was now no doubt at all that Gossain was 'miching mallecho', he meant mischief; he was the sort of person who could "adduce economic and political justifications in support of ruining his companions through treachery".⁴⁴ And so, on 31 August, Kanailal Dutt and Satyendra Bose found the chance to kill the wretched Gossain in a narrow alley leading from the jail hospital to the jail gate, and thereby to silence him for ever. At once the little freedom that had been given to the prisoners was now taken away, and once again they were removed to their respective cells. Collected in two instalments the accused numbered forty-

⁴³ *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Centre of Education Edition), 1955, p. 341.

⁴⁴ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 27, p. 154.

four. As for Kanailal and Satyendra, although their audacious action predictably attracted summary punishment a fortnight later, they nevertheless won renown, in Sisirkumar Mitra's words, as "two of the greatest martyrs in the cause of India's liberty, compared by a British paper with Harmodius and Aristogeiton of Greek fame"; and Lajpat Rai wrote in his *Autobiography* that "a day will come when people will take wreaths of homage to their statues".

Sri Aurobindo was superficially a part of all this ghastly drama, yet not of it; he was one of the undertrial prisoners, yet he seemed, like a star, to stand aloof and above. When he was brought before Mr. Birley on 11 June, "a black ring was distinctly visible around Aurobindo Babu's eyes"; two days later, he "laughed heartily while conversing with his pleaders, only he looked paler than before".⁴⁵ In the early part of August, he was reported to be ill in jail.⁴⁶ And thus with interesting vicissitudes, which affected different people in different ways, the trial laboriously dragged itself to a conclusion. Mr. Birley had examined 222 witnesses, and recorded the evidence or statements of several of the accused, including the approver. On 19 August, Mr. Birley framed charges against Sri Aurobindo and the others, and the case was now to go to the sessions. Notwithstanding the silencing of Gossain twelve days later, Norton was confident of getting a conviction at the sessions. Sri Aurobindo's sister, Sarojini, therefore made a further

⁴⁵ *Bande Mataram Weekly*, 14 June 1908.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 16 August 1908, *vide* sub-leader on "Very Ill in Jail." This seems to have been an exaggeration. There was only "a superficial ailment for some time which was of no consequence" (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 88).

appeal for funds to her countrymen to raise the defence fund from Rs. 23,000, where it then stood, to at least Rs. 60,000, the absolute minimum required to organise Sri Aurobindo's defence to match Mr. Norton's prosecution.

In the meantime, the position of the *Bande Mataram* became shaky owing to the lack of financial support and the withdrawal of Sri Aurobindo from the editorial sanctum. The paper carried on desperately for a time, thanks to the courage and resourcefulness of Shyam-sundar Chakravarti, Hemendra and Bejoy Chatterjee, but this could not go on for ever. It was decided, therefore, that the paper should die with a bang rather than cease with a whimper, and so "Bejoy Chatterjee was commissioned to write an article for which the Government would certainly stop the publication of the paper".⁴⁷ And that was how this great paper that had made history as the flaming standard-bearer of Indian Nationalism went down in blazing colours, fighting till the last.

Wasn't Sri Aurobindo shaken — wasn't he at least disturbed — by the chain of events: the framing of charges, the committal to sessions, the killing of Gossain, the martyrdom of Kanailal and Satyen, the closure of the *Bande Mataram*? What was the meaning of it all? Weren't blind or evil forces operating, turning everything awry? But no! Sri Aurobindo's faith stood like a rock in the storm. His recently acquired calm remained as a settled thing, and declined to be ruffled any more. What had happened, and what was happening, only called for a spirit of reverence and an attitude of total surrender. The gains of his first weeks in prison — the inner poise and equanimity, the total trust in God, the constant feel-

⁴⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 54.

ing of the Mother's embrace — stood the test of these new difficulties and challenges. In His Will was his peace, and he knew that the Divine Will was working out its inscrutable purposes in its own way:

There is no event — great or small or even the smallest — from which some good has not accrued. He often fulfils three or four aims through a single event. We frequently see the working of a blind force in the world; accepting waste as part of nature's method, we ignore God's omniscience and find fault with the divine intelligence. The charge is unfounded. The Divine Intelligence never works blindly, there cannot be the slightest waste of His power; rather, the restrained manner in which, through the minimum of means, He achieves a variety of results is beyond the human intelligence...⁴⁸

VI

While thus all was felicity within, the world outside continued to be agitated by the imprisonment of Sri Aurobindo and the protracted and sensational trial that made the headlines day after day for weeks, and months, on end. The case commenced in the Alipur Sessions Court on 19 October 1908. Mr. C. P. Beachcroft, the District and Sessions Judge, who tried the case, had been with Sri Aurobindo at Cambridge, and had stood second in Greek while the other — now the accused — had stood first. Beachcroft had now the very unpleasant task of "trying" the caged Sri Aurobindo on a charge of waging war against the King. So dangerous were the accused in the eyes of the panicky Government that they

⁴⁸ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 27, p. 139

were kept throughout in a cage during the trial, with wire-netting and locking arrangements. Another of his Cambridge contemporaries and class-mates, Ferrar, who was a practising barrister in Malaya, happened to pass through Calcutta at the time, and felt most concerned when he saw Sri Aurobindo in the court-cage. He would have liked to get Sri Aurobindo at least out of the cage, but didn't know how. Everyday as the prison authorities escorted the accused in the prison van from the Jail to the Court Room, Ullaskar Datta used to give a lead to the singing and shouting all along the way.⁴⁹ Indifferent to the proceedings in the Court where legal wranglings and examination and cross-examination of an apparently endless succession of witnesses were taking place, the prisoners in their caged isolation used to engage in serious discussions, and on one occasion Sri Aurobindo traced the history of the revolutionary spirit, how Mironow the Russian revolutionary had told Hem Chandra Kanungo in Paris: "We learnt revolutionary methods from the Chinese, who claim they got them from India. How is it, then, that you now come to us for light?"

When the trial at last began, there was — as might have been expected — a tense atmosphere in the Court. Not content with putting the accused into a cage, police with fixed bayonets stood guard everywhere in the Court and its environs, and Mr. Norton himself, the great indefatigable Counsel-in-Chief for the prosecution, found it necessary to keep a five-chambered loaded revolver on his brief throughout the trial.⁵⁰ Drama was thus being queered more and more into Elizabethan melodrama,

⁴⁹ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Cf Eardley Norton's Foreword to Bejoy Krishna Bose's *Alipore Bomb Trial*.

while the men in the cage were also giving it a half-tragic and a half-farcical touch. For the first few days, a leading Calcutta barrister appeared for Sri Aurobindo and Barindra, but as they couldn't afford the fees he demanded, he soon gave up the case. It was then that Chittaranjan Das — the "Deshabandhu" of a later day — agreed to appear for Sri Aurobindo. It is said that the spirit of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, who had died during captivity in the Campbell Hospital, appeared in a dream to Das and told him that he should take up the defence of Sri Aurobindo. Das's mother too seems to have asked him not to hesitate, for his duty lay in taking up the case. Sarojini Ghose and her friends had thus succeeded in avoiding the "sharks" of the legal profession, and they found in Chittaranjan a true Defender of the Faith and a great prophet of the future. At that time, Chittaranjan was known to be a rising criminal lawyer, a sensitive poet, a dedicated patriot, a flaming idealist and an adoring son and servant of the Mother. He came upon the court scene at Alipur, and the prospect brightened up at once for the Defence.

Chittaranjan, although he was not then the power in the legal world that he became soon after, gave his whole heart and soul to the organisation of the Defence, and during the next six months devoted himself day and night to the task, and took practically no fees. It was the discipline of a Titan's labour, it was the ministry of a noble mission. We learn that "in this case 206 witnesses were examined, 4000 documents were filed as exhibits, consisting of bombs, revolvers, ammunition, detonators, fuses, poisonous acids, and other explosive materials, numbered 5000".⁵¹ Poet, visionary, patriot,

⁵¹ *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, p. 59.

Chittaranjan had come to his brother poet's defence, put away from him "all other thoughts and abandoned all his practice" and had for months overworked himself and ruined his health⁵² — but it was a great cause and it was heroic service of the Mother as well. Not Sri Aurobindo, but the Mother's great and unique son, Her conscience made manifest, Her flaming heart and radiant soul — these were under trial. It was the Divine's working too that, not a gluttonous shark of the profession, not a merely superlatively clever Barrister, but a valiant St. George of the Bar should come forward to give battle to the Dragon.

It is not necessary here to go over the whole exasperating legalistic ground once again. The prosecution, although they moved heaven and earth in order to achieve their object, just couldn't prove their case against Sri Aurobindo. Asked by the Court, Sri Aurobindo had said that he would leave the case entirely to his lawyers; he himself did not wish to make any statement or even to answer the Court's questions. As in *Perseus the Deliverer*, there was here too the vast invisible struggle between the dark nether forces of the foreign bureaucracy on the one hand and, on the other, the forces of light striving to break into the theatre of Chaos and Old Night and put them to flight. While, like Andromeda lying in chains on the nude high rock, Sri Aurobindo sat in his corner of the exposed cage absorbed in meditation, not listening to the evidence, not attending to the trial; while, in the background, like Poseidon and Pallas Athene the powers of the Bureaucracy and of Nationalism were anxiously awaiting the outcome of the issue; there, in the foreground — like the

⁵² *Speeches*, p. 59.

formidable sea-monster and the bright Sun-God Perseus — the redoubtable Eardley Norton and the young Apollo Chittaranjan fought out the issue between the Old and the New, slavery and freedom, death and life. Norton's massive experience and sheer driving intellectual power met Chittaranjan's jets of emotion and lightning intuitive leaps. Was it Goliath against David, or the Dragon against Perseus? The Alpine edifices of evidence, the superb dialectics, the ruthless browbeatings, the hectorings and the innuendoes, the banterings and the baitings, the legal quibblings and the trained ventriloquisms, all ultimately availed nothing in the face of the clear stream of Ganga that reflected a thousand lights yet flowed majestically, bringing the benediction of success. Much of the dark pillared heights of the prosecution case was eaten up by the gleaming lights from Chittaranjan's Lamp of Defence. It was almost as in the climactic scene in *Savitri*:

He called to Night but she fell shuddering back,
He called to Hell but silently it retired...

His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.⁵³

The case for the defence simply was that it was perfectly true that Sri Aurobindo had taught the people of India the name and meaning and content of Swaraj or National Independence. If that by itself was a crime, Sri Aurobindo would very willingly plead guilty to the charge. The guilt was writ large in his writings and in his speeches, and he would be prepared to reiterate yet once again that particular "guilt". There was no need at all to bring witness after witness to prove something that the accused himself did not dispute, and wouldn't dream of disputing. If to take the name of Swaraj and

⁵³ *Savitri*, p 749.

to propagate its meaning was to be deemed guilty, he would be ready to suffer to the uttermost for having preached the message of Independence to the people. But let not the prosecution charge Sri Aurobindo with things he had not done, which were in fact repugnant to his whole philosophy and scheme of things. He had taught the people of India how the ideals of democracy and national independence could be translated into reality in terms of Vedantic self-awakening, self-discipline and self-realisation. He had never approved spasmodic terrorist acts, he had never thought that such acts would usher in independence. Sri Aurobindo was a Vedantic Nationalist, not a mere bomb-throwing terrorist.

Chittaranjan's speech for the defence was spread over eight days, and came to be praised universally as an eloquent epic of forensic art. What was Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of action? What was it — in the individual as well as National planes? Just this, affirmed Chittaranjan. Vedantism. Sri Aurobindo was not a politician in the ordinary, Western sense of the term, but a deeply committed person to whom politics was as profoundly spiritual an experience as was religion itself. Elucidating this point, Chittaranjan continued:

As in the case of individuals you cannot reach your God with extraneous aid, but you must make an effort — that supreme effort — yourself before you can realise the God within you; so also with a nation. It is by itself that a nation must grow; a nation must attain its salvation by its unaided effort. No foreigner can give you that salvation. It is within your own hands to revive that spirit of nationality. That is the doctrine of nationality which Aurobindo has preached throughout, and that was

to be done not by methods which are against the traditions of the country... the doctrines he preached are not doctrines of violence but doctrines of passive resistance. It is not bombs, but suffering.... He says, believe in yourself; no one attains salvation who does not believe in himself. Similary, he says, in the case of a nation.⁵⁴

How Chittaranjan proved that the letter purported to have been written by Barindra to his elder brother Sri Aurobindo was no more than a forgery — “as clumsy as those Piggott had got up to incriminate Parnell after the murder of Lord Cavendish in Phoenix Park”⁵⁵ — is of course among the most thrilling denouements in the history of criminal cases. O Bureaucracy! all that and forgery too? And Sri Aurobindo too must have found a certain grim satisfaction in the parallelism between the two prosecutions — both fathered ultimately by the same imperial Power.

Having thus masterfully demolished what must have initially appeared to be a piece of damning evidence against Sri Aurobindo, Chittaranjan in his memorable peroration — delivered as if he was a man divinely possessed — made a unique appeal to Mr. Beachcroft the Judge and the two Assessors:

My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, the agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India, but across distant seas

⁵⁴ *Life and Times of G. R. Das*, p. 62 ⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 62.

and lands. Therefore, I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this Court, but before the bar of the High Court of History.⁵⁶

Prophetic words — and more than prophetic words. When the hearing had concluded, the two Assessors returned a unanimous verdict of “Not Guilty” about Sri Aurobindo on 14 April 1909. Three weeks later, on 6 May, accepting the Assessors’ verdict, Mr. Beachcroft acquitted Sri Aurobindo.

Of the rest, Barindra and Ullaskar received death sentences; some were exiled to the Andamans for life, some were sentenced to transportation or rigorous imprisonment for several years; and some fifteen, including Nolini Kanta Gupta, were acquitted along with Sri Aurobindo. Presently, C. R. Das appealed to the High Court on behalf of those who had been convicted, and as a result Barindra and Ullaskar had their death sentences commuted into transportation for life. There were other reductions too in course of time, and so they were all permitted to return to normal life before many years passed. But at the moment the death sentences were passed, Ullaskar had merely thrown up a sardonic smile and remarked, “Thank God, this damn’d show is ended after all”. They had all aspired nobly, dared greatly, lived dangerously, and they were able also — at life’s extremity — to laugh at death. Although it is not to our purpose here to follow the fortunes of the various accused in later years, two of them at least deserve more than a passing mention. Of Barindra, the brain and heart of the Manicktolla enterprise, Mr. Norton himself said while introducing a book on the trial:

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 59-64

The ringleader was a young man of unusual qualities. No lawyer can defend his action; no statesman applaud it. None the less, Barindra Kumar Ghose was sincere, and in a great measure chivalrous. Ullaskar, as a college student, had thrashed his professor, one Mr. Russell, for having spoken deprecatingly of the Bengalis. He had then joined the Manicktolla group and started making bombs. Love of the Motherland was a consuming passion with him, and nothing else mattered. Like Barin, Ullaskar too spent ten or more years in the Andamans, and that must have affected both body and mind. "But this, after all, was part of the ritual of sacrifice", says Nolini, and concludes with Barin's defiant words: "Such indeed was the vow in this kind of marriage". Barin and Ullaskar and the rest of those young men who suffered prison life at Alipur for a year and some more years undergoing their sentences were all children of the Mother born with a feeling of tragic fatality. They counted not the cost of patriotism, they didn't compromise and prevaricate to buy freedom at the cheapest market, they didn't put comfort and security and quickest getting on in life above single-minded service of the Mother. If they were "misguided", they paid the penalty for it. But what at this distance of time cries to be remembered is that those young men, parched with the thirst for freedom, couldn't go into nice prudential calculations but sought the drink that came handy — resolute action regardless of consequences. They could both sing exultingly this chorus and also live in the light of its uncompromising code:

A day indeed has dawned,
When a million hearts
Have known not to fear

And leave no debts unpaid.
 Life and death are
 Bondslaves at our feet;
 Our hearts have forgotten to care.⁵⁷

VII

While still in the Alipur Jail (the Government Hotel at Alipur, as Sri Aurobindo once humorously called it), he had written a number of articles with titles such as 'The Morality of the Bomb', 'The Psychology of the Bomb' and 'The Policy of the Bomb', and these had been sent out of the prison through a friend. But he too was afraid that police might seize the articles, and so he put them in a piece of hollow bamboo and buried it in the earth; when he dug up the bamboo later, the papers were found to have been eaten away by white ants. A better fate, however, overtook some of the poetic compositions of this period. The experience of Divine manifestation in everything and everybody was a new ground of realisation. But he had reached this spot only by battering his way through thorns and brambles, defying hazards and dieting on difficulties:

With wind and the weather beating round me
 Up to the hill and the moorland I go.
 Who will come with me? Who will climb with me?
 Wade through the brook and tramp through the
snow?

Not in the petty circle of cities
 Cramped by your doors and your walls I dwell;
 Over me God is blue in the welkin,

⁵⁷ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, pp. 4-5.

Against me the wind and the storm rebel.⁵⁸

In another poem, *The Mother of Dreams*, written in long lines of linked sweetness and interior double-rhymes, Sri Aurobindo's Muse rides triumphantly on the crest of a complicated rhythm and achieves a memorable articulation in eloquent praise of the Mother — "the home-of-all, the womb-of-all", in Hopkins's suggestive phrase — who in myriad ways manifests Herself to terrestrial men and women. What visions are these that visit us as we are lapped in grey, soft and restful slumber? What sights, what sounds are these, what are these images, what is this bliss profound, — what are these intimations that thus implicate us in their grandeur and in their impenetrable and ineluctable mystery? Sri Aurobindo's imagination and his spiritual fervour weave a velvet magic about these meandering and soul-enchancing lines, and the poem itself is a dream-world of incommunicable beauty and felicity. One must read and chant the whole poem slowly, for it is endowed with something of the *mantra śakti* of the revealed word, and once we surrender ourselves to the magic of its rhythmic sound, we find easy entrance into the deathless world of its mystic harmony. We can quote the concluding lines here, as powerful a piece of utterance as any in the whole body of Sri Aurobindo's poetry:

Doors have flung wide in the chambers of pride where
the gods reside and the Apsaras dance in their
circles faster and faster.

For thou art she whom we first can see when we pass
the bounds of the mortal,

There at the gates of the heavenly states thou hast
planted thy wand enchanted over the head of the

⁵⁸ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 121

Yogin waving.

From thee are the dream and the shadows that seem and
 the fugitive lights that delude us;
 Thine is the shade in which visions are made; sped by
 thy hands from celestial lands come the souls that
 rejoice for ever.
 Into thy dream-worlds we pass or look in thy magic
 glass, then beyond thee we climb out of Space and
 Time to the peak of divine endeavour.⁵⁹

From the fullness of such poetic recordation, it is surely sacrilege to detract anything, and mere exegesis must only end in such detraction. Suffice for us to know that Sri Aurobindo had become, while cooped up supposedly in petty space, the sort of man who could peep into Infinity and render its untranslatable wonders in streams of such vibrant melody. Stone walls made no prison to him, nor iron grating a cage; for a soul enfranchised as his, the dungeon was very hermitage, and his soul moved unhorizoned with angel-wings and glimpsed the Lord in everything. There is a sovereign sense of bareness in the shorter poem, and there is a like sovereign suggestion of richness and magnificence in the second — but both partake of the Bliss of Brahman in the infinite manifestations of the Divine play. Sri Aurobindo has safely come through the devouring coils of adverse circumstance; he has baffled the sudden intrusion of the Everlasting No and affirmed the incandescent hues of the Everlasting Yea. He has ceased to be a “traveller between life and death”, and he has become instead a Pilgrim of Eternity.

After a whole year in prison, Sri Aurobindo came out on 6 May 1909, and went straight to his maternal uncle's

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 122

house — the *Sanjivani* Office — at 8, College Square. One who saw him then has since recorded that Sri Aurobindo sat “outwardly unconcerned and unperturbed. He had, as it were, drawn his mind into the depth of his being. He looked up to the skies — a distant look in his eyes — oblivious of his immediate surroundings.”⁶⁰

A wide God-knowledge poured down from above,
A new world-knowledge broadened from within...
The human in him paced with the divine.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Justice S. R. Das in *Mother India*, January 1959.

⁶¹ *Savitri*, p. 51.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KARMAYOGIN

I

A whole year in prison, in Alipur most of the time; in the eyes of the outside world, a year of bleak or baneful incarceration. Yet, for Sri Aurobindo himself, the jail had been no cage of confinement, but a veritable Yogashram where Purushottama had befriended him, and had sported as Guru, companion and master. Thus had Sri Aurobindo's "enemies", by sending him to prison, only opened to him the doors of sudden enlightenment and felicity. And it had always been like that, for the highest good had come to Sri Aurobindo from his so-called "enemies" — and now he had *no* "enemy" in the world, the word had no meaning whatsoever.¹

Even in prison, then, for a soul unhorizoned like his there could be no real confinement. But when on acquittal the human body too was freed from captivity, he had to act a human role and speak in human accents. He knew that, on his arrest, his sister Sarojini had appealed for funds because, having "taken a vow of poverty in the service of the Motherland", he had no means of engaging the services of a barrister, and she had therefore been driven to the necessity of relying upon the public spirit and generosity of her countrymen on his behalf. The response had been good, and numberless people, known and unknown, had been with him in his hour of tribulation and trial. He therefore wrote a week after his

¹ Based on Sri Aurobindo's *Kara-Kahini*; *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27, p. 120

release to the *Bengalee* this letter of thanksgiving:

....The love which my countrymen have heaped upon me in return for the little I have been able to do for them, amply repays any apparent trouble or misfortune my public activity may have brought upon me. I attribute my escape to no human agency, but first of all to the protection of the Mother of us all who has never been absent from me but always held me in Her arms and shielded me from grief and disaster, and secondarily to the prayers of thousands which have been going up to Her on my behalf ever since I was arrested. If it is the love of my country which led me into danger, it is also the love of my countrymen which has brought me safe through it.

Love was the one sovereign reality. Love of the country, love of India the Mother, love that had bled at the sight of the Mother in bondage, this love had led him to dare danger and difficulty; and his countrymen's love — the infinite love of his numberless brothers and sisters — welling up to the mighty Mother had made Her take him in Her arms, shield him from defeat and despair, and brought him safely through the ordeal. Patriotism was but a form of love, and suffering itself was a means to the awakening of the love Divine.

Sri Aurobindo was "free", the bureaucracy had been humbled, and his friends were elated. But as for Sri Aurobindo himself, he had no cause for exultation, he could have no sense of victory; there was only a deep calm, a fecund serenity that seemed poised for some new action. Bengal — and all India — had suffered a dismal change during the twelve months of his incarceration. A political paralysis seemed to be creeping over the country drying up the blood-streams of national life. What

had happened to the promised Dawn? Where were the accredited tribunes of the people? Why were fewer and fewer political meetings held, and why were they attended — not by tens of thousands as before, but only by a few hundred? How had such listlessness and resignation seized the body and soul of the people of Bengal, the people of India?

But Sri Aurobindo wouldn't feel defeated or dispirited. He started holding meetings, even if they should be but poorly attended. He held discussions with leaders, he waited for the inner call. Then, suddenly, something — something quite extraordinary — happened. He was invited to Uttarpara, not far from Calcutta, to speak under the auspices of the Dharma Rakshini Sabha. On 30 May he went by train to Uttarpara, where he was received by the local Zemindar; and in the evening, Sri Aurobindo was taken in a procession to the place of the meeting on the banks of the Ganges. The audience numbered over ten thousand, and he was the sole speaker and was heard with rapt and reverent attention. He had intended at first to speak on the Hindu Religion, but as he sat there a word came to him, a word he had to speak to the Indian nation. In fact, the word had come to him in jail, and he must now speak it to the people. And so he rose to address the gathering that was thus uniquely privileged to hear first the "word" meant for the whole nation. He took a quick backward glance at recent events, the deportations, the thinning of the ranks of the nationalists, the drastic change in the political climate:

...now that I have come out, I find all changed.

One who always sat by my side and was associated in my work is a prisoner in Burma;².... I looked

² Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who had been sentenced to six years' imprison-

round when I came out, I looked round for those to whom I had been accustomed to look for counsel and inspiration. I did not find them. There was more than that. When I went to jail, the whole country was alive with the cry of *Bande Mataram*, alive with the hope of a nation, the hope of millions of men who had newly risen out of degradation. When I came out of jail I listened for that cry, but there was instead a silence. A hush had fallen on the country and men seemed bewildered; for instead of God's bright heaven full of the vision of the future that had been before us, there seemed to be overhead a leaden sky from which human thunders and lightnings rained.³

The arrests and trials and heavy sentences and barbarous deportations — the "human thunders and lightnings"! — were meant to crush the spirit of the people, and this tidal wave of repression and the false logic behind it provoked even Morley to protest in these terms:

That's the Russian argument; by packing off train-loads of suspects to Siberia, we'll terrify the anarchists out of their wits, and all will come out right. That policy did not work out brilliantly in Russia, and did not save Russia from a Duma, the very thing that the Trepoffs and the rest of the 'offs' "deprecated and detested".⁴

ment for his articles in the *Kesari* commenting on the Muzzaferpore bomb-outrage, was then a prisoner at Mandalay in Burma.

³ Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, p. 52. On 11 December 1908, Minto had issued orders for the arrest and deportation of Subodh Mulick, Krishna Kumar Mitra, Manoranjan Guhathakurta, Shyamsundar Chakravarti, Aswini Kumar Dutta and others.

⁴ *Life and Times of C.R. Das*, p. 71. Cf. also Morley's letter to Minto of 6 January 1909: "After all, if we press to the bottom of things, I con-

But the "men on the spot" — the bureaucracy in India — had had their way, and the lights had gone out, and a pall and a silence had descended on the people. When Sri Aurobindo had last come to Uttarpara — that was over a year ago — Bepin Pal had made a memorable speech. He had then come out of the Buxar jail, and he had given the word that had come to him in jail from God. Sri Aurobindo too had been initiated in jail, and he would now give the Word to the world.

After this exordium, Sri Aurobindo went on to describe the circumstances of his arrest, his initial sense of defeat, the first hint of the Divine purpose behind his removal from the political scene, the reading of the *Gita*, the Vision of Narayana — the blissful experience of Vasudeva everywhere and in all things. Living with the other accused, he had seen them too hedged in with divinity; and when — after the killing of the approver, Narendranath — Sri Aurobindo had been once more "hurried away to the seclusion of a solitary cell", He had surprised him with more and more of His wonders. In his Baroda days he had first approached God and wanted, not *mukti* or personal salvation, but only strength for serving and uplifting his people. Again the cry was to be wrung from his heart:

Then in the seclusion of the jail, of the solitary cell, I asked for it again. I said, "Give me Thy Adesh. I do not know what work to do or how to do it. Give me a message."⁵

jecture that the active man in this chapter of business must be Stuart or Plowden or somebody of the Police; and that breed needs searching scrutiny step by step in these matters. Lawyers are not always to be trusted; still less are Police authorities" (Quoted in Syed Razi Wasti's *Lord Minto and the Indian Nationalist Movement: 1905 to 1910, 1964*, p. 121).

⁵ *Speeches*, p. 62.

Presently, in the communion of Yoga, he had received two messages. First, that it was the Divine intention that Sri Aurobindo should go forth into the world and do His work. Secondly, that the lights he had seen in prison, the truths he had glimpsed, the experiences he had gained in the year of seclusion should help Sri Aurobindo to take to the people the strength of the Sanatana Dharma. But this eternal religion, this Sanatana Dharma, albeit it had been cherished and preserved by the Aryan people in India, was really the possession of all humanity: the "Hindu" religion was also the universal religion, because it embraced the essence of all religions. And he went on to explain:

If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose. This (Hinduism) is the one religion that can triumph over materialism by including and anticipating the discoveries of science and the speculations of philosophy. It is the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God. It is the one religion which insists every moment on the truth which all religions acknowledge that He is in all men and all things, and that in Him we move and have our being.... It is the one religion which shows the world what the world is, that it is the *lila* of Vasudeva.... It is the one religion which does not separate life in any smallest detail from religion, which knows what immortality is, and has utterly removed from us the reality of death.⁶

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

This was the 'word' that had been put into his mouth to speak to the people of India through the members of the "Society for the Protection of Religion". To protect the Hindu religion was to protect all true religion; it was to be able to assimilate the latest genuine science and philosophy; it was to see the One reality behind the façade of manifold appearance; it was to achieve closeness to God in all acts, thoughts and words; it was, above all, to win victory over the fear of death and embrace the puissance of the soul's immortality. Only men charged with purpose and power by such a universal, such an eternal, religion — Sanatana Dharma — could successfully fight the battle of nationalism and win the right to call themselves true children of the Mother. It would be seen that between the Bombay National Union speech of 19 January 1908 and the Uttarpara speech of 30 May 1909, there was much common ground — but there was some significant difference in stress as well. Sri Aurobindo had spoken at Bombay after his Baroda *nirvanic* experience, while at Uttarpara he spoke after the Alipur experience of Narayana *darśan*. Yet it was the same man, dedicated to the service of the Mother, the man self-poised and self-giving and exuding iron resolve and tremendous purpose. At Uttarpara, Sri Aurobindo gave the "word" he had been charged to give, but there was still the "work" he had been ordained to do. And the time for it would come too, and the inner Guide would show him the way and the means at the appropriate time.

II

Along with Sri Aurobindo, some of the other accused too — Bejoy Nag and Nolini Kanta Gupta among them — had been released, and these two young men, “wandering about like floating weeds or moss”,⁷ used to meet him in the afternoons, and also accompanied him on his short political tour of Assam. Presently, Sri Aurobindo decided to start two weekly papers, the *Karmayogin* in English and the *Dharma* in Bengali. The Nationalist party of Bengal had all but disintegrated, and Sri Aurobindo thought he should put new life into it and impart to it a new and steady sense of movement towards a clearly visualised goal. It is important to remember that, although he was offered the editorship of the *Bengalee*, and although he was promised help if he would re-start the *Bande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo resolved rather to break fresh ground by launching journals entirely his own. Accommodation was found at 4, Shyampukur Lane, the press and the office in front and living rooms at the back. The *Karmayogin* came out on 19 June, and its Bengali counterpart, the *Dharma*, on 23 August. While staying on at his uncle’s place (the *Sanjivani* office), Sri Aurobindo came to Shyampukur every afternoon and remained there till late at night. Besides Bejoy Nag and Nolini, who were permanent residents there, others too regularly joined them. Guru and senior comrade, Sri Aurobindo “taught” them all the time, albeit without their realising what was happening to them:

Sri Aurobindo had his own novel method of education. It did not proceed by the clock, nor accord-

⁷ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, p. 34.

ing to a fixed routine or curriculum, that is, there was nothing of the school about it. It went simply and naturally along lines that seemed to do without rules.⁸

His method in teaching a foreign language like French seems to have been to begin straightaway with a classic, for example Moliere's *L'Avare*. Again, as earlier at Baroda, at Shyampukur too Sri Aurobindo seems to have experimented with "automatic" or mediumistic writing or speech. The young men sitting around Sri Aurobindo in an unlighted room at eight would suddenly hear a voice—Sri Aurobindo's and yet not his—breaking the silence, announcing its identity—perhaps Danton, or Bankim, or Theramenes!—and speaking in English. What did it all amount to? Certainly, supraphysical beings do exist; and some supraphysical beings—or portions or emanations of them—might achieve entry into a ready human medium, make compromises with the materials (body, life, mind) comprising the medium, and try to communicate as from the "beyond" to the "here and now". But such communications are seldom articulate to any definite purpose. There could be exceptions, of course, and Sri Aurobindo himself later claimed that Vivekananda had spoken in the Alipur jail to him and that Rammohan Roy had given the material that went into the book *Yogic Sadhan*.⁹ But these were events of no more than marginal relevance to the "work" Sri Aurobindo had to do.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 37-9. Cf. Sri Aurobindo: "The writing was done as an experiment as well as an amusement and nothing else.... But the results did not satisfy him and after a few further experiments at Pondicherry, he dropped these experiments altogether" (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 108-9).

In its first issue, the *Karmayogin* described itself as "a weekly Review of National Religion, Literature, Science, Philosophy, etc."; among the contributors would be "Sriyut Aurobindo Ghose and others"; the cover illustration was of the Chariot, with Arjuna and Sri Krishna seated in it; and the motto of the journal was the *Gita vākya*, "Yoga is skill in works". It was to be a *national* review and not a weekly newspaper. Current events were important only in so far as they tended to help or hinder "the growth of national life and the development of the soul of the nation". Many things went into the life of the nation, and unless they became a total and purposive strength, an integrated dynamic of forward-looking motivation and action, mere varied activity in the divers fields of religion, politics, literature, science, philosophy, industry and commerce might prove to be activity at cross-purposes, and instead of strengthening the nation might actually weaken it and give its movement a wrong or even backward direction. India's political activity had "crept in a channel cut for European or Europeanised minds"; the other streams of national activity were running in "disconnected channels, sluggish, scattered and ineffectual". The one thing needful was to make them all flow together towards a truly worthy national goal. And the *Karmayogin* would address itself to the task of helping to bring this about:

There is the sentiment of Indianism, there is not yet the knowledge. There is a vague idea, there is no definite conception or deep insight. We have yet to know ourselves, what we were and may be; what we did in the past and what we are capable of doing in the future: our history and our mission. This is the first and most important work which the

Karmayogin sets for itself, to popularise this knowledge. And the second thing is how to use these assets so as to swell the sum of national life and produce the future. It is easy to appraise their relations to the past; it is more difficult to give them their place in the future. The third thing is to know the outside world and its relation to us and how to deal with it. That is the problem which we find at present the most difficult and insistent, but its solution depends on the solution of the others.

In this supreme task of mobilisation of our faculties on the issue of taking resolute leaps towards the future, the urgent task was the awakening of our *brahmatej*, which was not what Europeans called "religion" but rather "spirituality":

...spirituality, the force and energy of thought and action arising from communion with or self-surrender to that within us which rules the world.... This force and energy can be directed to any purpose God desires for us; it is sufficient to knowledge, love or service; it is good for the liberation of an individual soul, the building of a nation or the turning of a tool. It works from within, it works in the power of God, it works with superhuman energy. The reawakening of that force in three hundred millions of men by the means which our past has placed in our hands, that is our object.¹⁰

To recapture the spiritual master-key to the solution of life's problems, to recover and integrate with our current life the essential inheritance from the past, to dare and fare forward: that was to be the national programme of

¹⁰ From the editorial article "Ourselves" in the inaugural issue of the *Karmayogin*.

action, and the *Karmayogin* would spell it out in detail and help to engineer the nation's movement towards a bright and purposive future.

The early issues of the *Karmayogin* carried Sri Aurobindo's English translations of the *Isha*, *Kena* and *Katha* Upanishads. The paper also published his renderings of Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara* and the first thirteen chapters of Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*, besides several of Sri Aurobindo's poems, *Who*, *Baji Prabhau*, *Epiphany*, *The Birth of Sin* and *An Image*. Among the constructive prose contributions were several series of essays like *A System of National Education*, *The Brain of India*, *The National Value of Art* and *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*. In some of the later issues appeared a group of Landor-like *Conversations of the Dead* — Dinshaw, Perizade; Turiu, Uriu; Two Souls in Pitri-Lok. In the last of these "conversations", Sri Aurobindo makes the Souls in Pitri-Lok say that, since the sorrows of the world call them, they will return to the earth and re-establish there the reign of joy, beauty and harmony.

Thus, although the spread of interests was commendably wide, it was nevertheless inevitable that the central accent should be on the developing political scene. Papers like the *Bengalee* and the *Indian Social Reformer* had chosen to ridicule Sri Aurobindo's Uttarpara speech and the tremendous revelations of his *sāadhanā* in prison. What, could the Lord have appeared and spoken — actually *spoken* — to an under-trial prisoner? Impossible and altogether improbable! The fourth issue of the *Karmayogin* gave a balanced and detailed rejoinder to these immaculate rationalists of Calcutta and Bombay. Again, when Baikunthanath Sen, President of the Hooghly Conference (6th and 7th September 1909), described

Sri Aurobindo as an "impatient idealist", the *Karmayogin* commented:

The reproach of idealism has always been brought against those who work with their eye on the future by the politicians who look only to the present. The reproach of impatience is levelled with equal ease and readiness against those who in great and critical times have the strength and skill to build with rapidity the foundations or the structure of the future.

"Ideals" were not idle things but the fruit of noble natures possessed of intensity of purpose:

Lifted high above the maya of manhood and womanhood is the life of the ideal. Ideals are not accidents. They are the fruit of long *tapas* and of many lives. Human life is made great in proportion to their intensity.

And running counter to the popular view about *sannyāsa* (renunciation) and the escapist adoration of a past golden age or a future existence other than the terrestrial, Sri Aurobindo affirmed categorically:

Let us think reverently of the task that is before us. Never in history has there been a greater age than now. Nothing in the past is too high for the present. *Sannyāsa* was not greater than public service. No form of Ishwara could be higher than Bhūmī Devi. This Devi we have to realise. Her worship we have to establish. And we may remember that in the form of Gandhārī she still sings to the Duryodhanas of this day, as of another long ago, *Yato dharmastato Jayah*.¹¹

¹¹ The *Karmayogin*, 11 September 1909

III

We have seen in an earlier chapter (III. vi) how the fiery-souled Sister Nivedita met Sri Aurobindo at Baroda in 1902, having read earlier with profound admiration his articles in the *Indu Prakash*. She could see in him even then the same missionary spirit that had animated her own great Master, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo glimpsed in her the Shakti that had made her the inspired author of *Kali, the Mother*. Returning to Bengal, she gave sustained support to him in his secret work, and in 1903 he appointed her a member of the controlling revolutionary committee of five; and during his first short spell of hectic political activity consequent on the Partition of Bengal, Nivedita kept close and continuous contact with him. His arrest and the rounding up of the revolutionaries proved a setback to the cause, but she was nothing daunted, and she wasn't disspirited either. Returning from Europe to India in July 1909, Nivedita was delighted that Sri Aurobindo was free again, and she promptly organised celebrations in her school. And she wondered at the marvellous change — the transformation — that had come over Sri Aurobindo. His face seemed to be all eyes and little else, eyes burning with the intensity and power that had become his during his *sāadhanā* in prison. This man with the tight-drawn skin and possessed of rock-like calm and exuding infinite assurance was no mere politician; he was the Life Force itself, the soul's sprout from the soil of India pointing fiercely towards the future. In the words of her biographer, Lizelle Raymond, in *The Dedicated*:

Nivedita thought she could still hear the voice

of Swami Vivekananda stirring up the masses: "Arise, Sons of India! Awake!" That had been the first phase of the struggle. Now this life-giving cry was repeated differently, because the effort required in the changing circumstances was no longer identical; but the source of it was still the same! Now the new order was that every individual should become a sadhak of the nation — a seeker — so that "the One could find Himself and manifest Himself in every human being, in all humanity". Aurobindo Ghose... was, as Nivedita understood him, the successor to the spiritual Masters of the past, offering the source of his inspiration for all to drink from in Yogic solitude. Since his imprisonment at Alipur, Aurobindo Ghose was no longer a fighter but a Yogi.

In the meantime, repression went on with redoubled ruthlessness, and there was also unending talk about the coming "reforms". Sri Aurobindo could hardly help taking note of these in his speeches and writings. In his Beadon Square speech on 13 June, Sri Aurobindo commented on both. Thus of the notorious "Sunset Regulation":

It appeared that we were peaceful citizens until sunset, but after sunset we turned into desperate characters, — well, he was told, even half an hour before sunset; apparently even the sun could not be entirely trusted to keep us straight. We had, it seems, stones in our pockets to throw at the police and some of us, perhaps, dangle bombs in our chadders.¹²

In his comprehensive speech on 17 July at the annual

¹² *Speeches*, p. 71

meeting of the Howrah People's Association, he spoke fervently on the "right of association" and on the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, and mounted an attack on the bureaucratic moves to brand rights and ideals as offences and crimes. And Sri Aurobindo could be devastatingly sarcastic when he wanted:

...there was the imagination of a very highly imaginative police which saw hidden behind the lathi the bomb. Now nobody ever saw the bombs. But the police were quite equal to the occasion; they thought there might be bombs. And what if there were not? Their imagination was quite equal to realising any bomb that could not be materialised.... The police suspected that the lathi was the father of the bomb. Their procedure was simple with the simplicity of the highest detective genius. When they heard of a respectable-sized dacoity, they immediately began to reason it out. They said, "Now why are there so many dacoities in the land? Obviously, the lathi fathered the bomb and the bomb fathered the dacoities. Who have lathis? The *Samitis*. Therefore it is proved. The *Samitis* are the dacoits". Our efficient police have always shown a wonderful ability. Generally when a dacoity is committed, the police are nowhere near.... They only come up when the dacoity is long over and say, "Well this is the work of the National Volunteers".¹³

In his Kumartuli speech, again, Sri Aurobindo described with playful irony his varied "friends" — the Hare Street friend, the Police-wallah, the Madras friend — and replied to their "friendly" suggestions. The Madras friend (the

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 107-8

Indian Patriot) had advised Sri Aurobindo to eschew politics and take to Sannyasa; the police would very much like him *not* to open his mouth "too much"; and the Hare Street friend (the *Englishman*) had asked Sri Aurobindo to devote himself to literature and religion, and not to make speeches on Swadeshi and Boycott. Yes, indeed, said Sri Aurobindo in reply: he *was* devoting himself to literature and religion; he was writing on Swaraj and Swadeshi, and that was a form of literature, and he was discoursing on Swaraj and Swadeshi, and that was part of his religion!¹⁴

As for the 'Minto-Morley' Reforms that were dangling in all their insubstantiality in the mid-air of political speculation, Sri Aurobindo had little doubt, with his intimate knowledge of the British people and the variety of their manufactures, that the Reforms belonged to the category of "Brummagem goods... a synonym for shoddy"; they would only throw "an apple of fresh discord among them"; they were hollow and pretentious, and "this offer of conciliation in one hand and the pressure of repression in the other" was a dangerously repressive policy.¹⁵ It was the classic policy of "In the one hand there is the sugar plum and in the other there is repression", as a statesman was to point out on the floor of the Indian Legislative Assembly nearly twenty years later.¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo therefore rightly insisted that the Reforms were a mockery and a trap, and that the cooperation

¹⁴ *ibid* , p. 126.

¹⁵ *Speeches*, pp. 128-9.

¹⁶ S. Srinivasa Iyengar, on 12 March 1929. Cf. Lord Minto: "The Government of India had to play a double part With one hand to dispense measures calculated to meet novel political conditions; with the other hand sternly to eradicate political crimes" (*India: Minto and Morley*, p. 414).

expected from the people was not what true cooperation should be but merely a pitiful parody of the same:

Cooperation can only be given if the Government which is now alien becomes our own, if the people have a share in it, not merely in name, not merely by the right of talk in the Legislative Council, not merely by apparent concessions, but by getting some measure of control in the matter of legislation, in the expenditure of taxes they are called upon to pay for the maintenance of the administration...¹⁷

But, then, there were the Moderates all agog with excitement in anticipation of the "coming Reforms". Any sporadic act of violence by an Indian — whether in England or in India — threw the Moderates into flutters of apprehension lest the Reforms should, after all, fail to materialise. Sri Aurobindo had thus to cross swords both with the bureaucracy and with the forces of Moderatism. Thus, when Gokhale made a speech in Poona in connection with the murders of Curzon Wylie and Lalcaca, the *Karmayogin* came out with a slashingly sarcastic editorial which concluded with these pointed and envenomed words:

He (Gokhale) publishes himself now as the righteous Bibhishan who, with the Sugrives, Angads, and Hanumans of Madras and Allahabad, has gone to join the Avatar of Radical absolutism in the India Office, and ourselves as the Rakshasa to be destroyed by this Holy Alliance.

An intimate knowledge of the *Ramayana* is needed to appreciate the subtlety of Sri Aurobindo's assailment of the Moderatist position. In the words of Prema Nandakumar, "the whole point of the indictment is that Morley

¹⁷ *Speeches*, pp. 122-3.

(or the British Government) was *not* an avatar like Rama, and Gokhale and his friends erred by imagining themselves in the righteous role of Vibhishana and the other allies of Rama, and erred even more by taking the Tilaks, Bepin Pals and Aurobindos to be of the tribe of Ravana".¹⁸

Like his countrymen, Sri Aurobindo too did not fail to recognise the finer elements in Gokhale's mind and character; he actually described the Poona leader in the Kumartuli speech as "one who had served and made sacrifices for the country".¹⁹ But when Gokhale denounced the ideals and activities of the Nationalists, when he said that "the ideal of independence was an ideal which no sane man could hold", when he described the people who advocated the peaceful methods of passive resistance as "men who, out of cowardice, do not speak out the thought that is in their hearts", it became then incumbent on Sri Aurobindo to accept the challenge and enter the fray. In both his College Square and Kumartuli speeches of July-August 1909, Sri Aurobindo replied to Gokhale and incidentally went again into the implications of the policy of Passive Resistance advocated by the Nationalists:

This was a very dangerous teaching which Mr. Gokhale introduced into his speech, that the ideal of independence — whether we call it Swaraj, or autonomy or Colonial Self-Government, because these two things in a country circumstanced like India meant in practice the same — cannot be achieved by peaceful means; Mr. Gokhale knows or ought to know that this ideal which he decries is deeply rooted in the minds of thousands of people

¹⁸ *The Glory and the Good* (1965), p. 13. ¹⁹ *Speeches*, pp. 129-30.

and cannot be driven out. He has told the ardent hearts which cherish this ideal of independence and are determined to strive towards it that their ideal can only be achieved by violent means. If any doctrine can be dangerous, if any teacher can be said to have uttered words dangerous to the peace of the country, it is Mr. Gokhale himself. We have told the people that there is a peaceful means of achieving independence in whatever form we aspire to it. We have said that by self-help, by passive resistance, we can achieve it.... Passive resistance means two things. It means, first, that in certain matters we shall not cooperate with the Government of this country until it gives us what we consider our rights. Secondly, if we are persecuted, if the plough of repression is passed over us, we shall meet it not by violence, but by suffering, by passive resistance, by lawful means. We have not said to our young men, "When you are repressed, retaliate"; we have said, "suffer".... We are showing the people of this country in passive resistance the only way in which they can satisfy their legitimate aspiration without breaking the law and without resorting to violence.²⁰

As for the charge of "cowardice" implied in Gokhale's Poona speech, Sri Aurobindo said that, although he was himself no model of courage, "residence for the best part of a year in a solitary cell had been an experience which took away all the terrors of transportation", and the conclusion he would draw from his own experience was simply this:

Imprisonment in a righteous cause was not so

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 119-21.

terrible as it seemed, suffering was not so difficult to bear as our anticipations made it out. The prize to which they aspired was the greatest to which a nation could aspire and if a price was asked of them, they ought not to shrink from paying it.²¹

The Nationalists were not, then, the mad men conjured by the imagination of the Moderates; nor were they cowards or men of double-talk eager merely to save their skins. On the contrary, they were genuine patriots who were ready, if required, to pay the price for the Swaraj they thirsted for and must obtain at all cost.

Repression, repression, hundred-limbed repression might prevail for the nonce, but that would not silence or cow down the Nationalists. What, after all, was repression? Soon after coming out of prison, Sri Aurobindo articulated a significant answer in the course of his Jhalakati speech on 23 June:

...it is a strange idea, a foolish idea, which men have... that a nation which has once risen, once has been called up by the voice of God to rise, will be stopped by mere physical repression.... Storm has swept over us today. I saw it come, I saw the striding of the storm-blast and the rush of the rain and as I saw it an idea came to me. What is this storm that is so mighty and sweeps with such fury upon us? And I said in my heart, "It is God who rides abroad on the wings of the hurricane...." A storm like this has swept also our national life. That too was the manifestation of the Almighty. We were building an edifice to be the temple of our Mother's worship.... It was then that He came down upon us ... He shook the roof with his mighty hands

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 131.

and part of the building was displaced and ruined. Why has He done this? Repression is nothing but the hammer of God that is beating us into shape so that we may be moulded into a mighty nation and an instrument for his work in the world. We are iron upon his anvil and the blows are showering upon us not to destroy but to re-create. Without suffering there can be no growth. It is not in vain that Aswini Kumar Dutt has been taken from his people. It is not in vain that Krishna Kumar Mitra²² has been taken from us and is rotting in Agra jail. It is not in vain that all Maharashtra mourns for Tilak at Mandalay. It is He, not any other, who has taken them and his ways are not the ways of men...²³

Gréat as Aswini Kumar Dutt and Tilak were, even without them—or without others who might be taken away—the movement would still go on, for God was the real leader, and He was irresistible. Had not Sri Aurobindo seen through the jail and the jail-keeper, the judge and the assessors, the confronting lawyers Mr. Norton and Chittaranjan, the witnesses and the visitors, and seen behind them all but *one* visage, *one* form, *one* manifestation? Temporary set-backs should not frighten the true *sadhaka* in the Temple of Patriotism. Set-backs were natural, set-backs were even inevitable in a high endeavour like the fight for freedom. But the national resolve must prevail in the end:

What is it that we seek? We seek the fulfilment of our life as a nation... that is why God has sent

²² Krishna Kumar Mitra was Sri Aurobindo's uncle in whose house (the *Sanjivani* office) he was staying at the time

²³ *Speeches*, pp. 81-2.

us into the world to fulfil Him by fulfilling ourselves in our individual life, in the family, in the community, in the nation, in humanity.... Our object, our claim is that we shall not perish as a nation, but live as a nation. Any authority that goes against this object will dash itself against the eternal throne of justice — it will dash itself against the laws of Nature which are the laws of God, and be broken to pieces.²⁴

IV

Sri Aurobindo's life, divided mainly between his uncle Krishna Kumar Mitra's house and the premises of the *Karmayogin* office, pursued its even course in the weeks and months immediately after his release from prison. In the mornings he sat on the veranda with hands crossed and dressed in dhoti and shirt, and expounded the *Gita* to the young men who gathered round him day after day. In the evenings, he was at the office in Shyampukur Lane, or away somewhere to speak at a public meeting. But the man of God, the new-gospeller of Sanatan Dharma, the unflinching Nationalist, the eloquent expounder of the *Gita*, the unconventional teacher of French, the experimenter with mediumistic automatic speech, this Yogi, this Nationalist, this Fighter was also gentleness incarnate in his relations with those near and dear to him. Basanti his cousin²⁵ has given us this intimate glimpse of Sri Aurobindo at this period of his life:

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 85-6.

²⁵ Krishna Kumar Mitra's daughter; Krishna Kumar had married Sri Aurobindo's mother's sister.

I never saw Sri Aurobindo getting angry. He is sitting in the hall and writing. His sandals are lying at a little distance. My mother comes, puts on his sandals and goes up to the terrace to take her constitutional walk. After some time people come to see Sri Aurobindo. He gets up, searches all round for his sandals. In the meantime he sees the aunt and smiles and asks her: "Little aunty! have you put on my sandals? There are visitors who have come to see me." The aunt gives him his sandals. That she took them away — that he had to wait — nothing of it made him angry.²⁶

And whenever his aunt had to go to the Ganges for a bath, Sri Aurobindo was ready enough to interrupt his own writing and accompany her to the river and back.²⁷

Two months after the *Karmayogin* had been launched, the first issue of its Bengali counterpart, the *Dharma*, came out on 23 August 1909. It carried as its epigraph the verse from the *Gita*: *yadā yadāhi dharmasya glānirbhavati Bhārata abhyutthānamadharmaṣya tadātmānam srjāmyaham* (Whenever Dharma declines and adharma is on the ascendant, O Bharata, it is then I bring about my birth). The professed object of the *Dharma* was to propagate Sanatana Dharma, the "Eternal Religion". Not "religion" exactly, for *dharmā* really means much more; it is nearer to the essential and unchanging Law of Life, or the Law Divine — for only the Law Divine can both include the essence of all religions while firmly surpassing their temporal limitations. As used by Sri Aurobindo, Sanatana Dharma was an inclusive yet timeless concept, true for all times and therefore true for his time as well:

²⁶ Purani, *Life* (1960), pp. 145-6.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 145.

Our aim is to spread the eternal religion and, based on that eternal religion, the observance of the religion of the race and the spirit of the age.... Knowledge, devotion and non-attached activity are the root of an Aryan education; liberality, love, courage, energy, modesty are signs of the Aryan character.... We have fallen from the ways of our religion, moved away from our goals... it should be our first aim to give the entire nation, especially the youth of the country, an adequate education, high ideals and a way of activity that will arouse these Aryan ideals. Till we succeed in doing that the spread of the eternal religion will be like sowing seeds in a barren field.

The performance of the racial religion will make it easier to serve the spirit of the age. This is an age of energy, shakti, and love.... Entering into and manifesting in the Aryan religion, composed of knowledge, devotion and non-attached action, these same powers are seeking for expansion and self-fulfilment. The signs of that energy of expression are severe austerity, high ideals, and noble action....

When the religion of the race and of the time-spirit are fulfilled, the eternal religion will spread and establish itself throughout the world.... The entire world will come to the Knower of Brahman, who will arise in the Aryan land.... It is to bring that day nearer that the Indians are rising, that is why this fresh awakening of Aryan ideas.²⁸

²⁸ English translation as in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27 (1968), pp 4-5. Most of Sri Aurobindo's contributions to the *Dharma* appear in translation in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Numbers 26 and 27.

There are constants as well as variables in all religions, — and it is the way of all religions progressively to ignore the constants of spirituality and to stratify the variables, even when they have become quite irrelevant, into the pseudo-constants of dogma, ritual and mere superstition. But Sanatana Dharma has a way of meeting, and entering into creative relationship with, both unique racial peculiarities and the peremptory requirements of the Time Spirit. Twentieth century India couldn't ignore the achievements of Western education, science, social and political organisation: nor could it ignore the essential Aryan ideals and virtues. Only an unfaltering grounding in the Spirit would help modern India to be Aryan, to be truly modern, and to fulfil its future role as the Guru of the Nations. Like the *Karmayogin*, the *Dharma* too would make the propagation of this message the cardinal aim of its high journalistic endeavour.

During its brief period of life, the *Dharma* seems to have given something new to Indian journalism. Although Sri Aurobindo never actually addressed a public meeting in Bengali, he had already — by the time he launched the *Dharma* — won an individual mastery of the language to be able to make an astonishing variety of contributions to the paper: essays on the Upanishads, the Puranas and the Gita (including a rendering of the first two Books), essays on Nationalism, religion and spirituality, essays on subjects like 'The Eight Siddhis', 'Sannyasa and Tyaga', 'National Resurgence and National Hatred' and 'Problems of the Past and Glimpses of the Future'. The *Dharma* was no doubt meant specially for those who couldn't read the *Karmayogin*, but the change of medium, the shift to a concentrated regional audience with its own ethos and slant of sensibility, and the

resulting larger freedom and intensity of expression must have given to the *Dharma* a fierce urgency and directness of appeal that perhaps even the *Karmayogin* lacked.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt a full review of Sri Aurobindo's contributions to the *Dharma*, it would not be out of place to refer here to one or two essays that throw a revealing light on the direction of his current thinking. In one essay, for example, he warned against the Indian political movement going the way of the West, exploiting hatred and necessarily employing violence. Although in its first stage, politics in India had handled Western methods, soon the second stage came when, "imbued with the spirit of the Divine Law", the main stress was on the adoration of India as the Mother. Politics was not a thing apart from life, but was a part of the Divine Law, and Sri Aurobindo pleaded that our young men should learn to root out hatred from their hearts, for rajasic turbulence in thought, feeling or action must defeat itself in the end.²⁹ The main requirement was the strength of calm, not the self-defeat of tumult and agitation. Human society had already passed through the largely vital and the largely mental (or rational) stages. The West had tried to translate the concepts of equality, fraternity and liberty into everyday realities — but without enduring success. Mankind must therefore either fare onward towards the heights where the soul (nor the mind) was predominant, or slink back precipitately to mere animality.³⁰ In another essay, Sri Aurobindo referred to the bullock-cart, the motor-car and the well-built chariot as vehicles symbolic of the tamasic, rajasic and sattwic types of the human person-

²⁹ *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 27 (1968), pp. 21-2.

³⁰ *ibid.*, Number 26 (1967), p. 85.

ality — but the “Chariot of Jagannath” is yet to come into being:

The ideal society is the vehicle of the indwelling Godhead of a human aggregate, the chariot for the journey of Jagannath. Unity, Freedom, Knowledge and Power constitute the four wheels of this chariot.³¹ Other societies had been conglomerations of egoistic men, loosely or insecurely held together and threatened by all kinds of inner tensions. But the society of the Future would be a “gnostic community created by delight and the unifying power of self-knowledge and divine knowledge”:

The day Self-born unity will come into being by the harmony and integration of knowledge, devotion and work, as impelled by the Will of the Virat Purusha the Universal Person, on that day the Chariot of Jagannath will come out of the avenues of the world, radiating its light in all directions. Satya Yuga the Age of Truth will descend upon earth; the world of mortal man will become the field for the play of the Divine, the temple-city of God, the metropolis of Ananda.³²

V

Sri Aurobindo came out of prison on 6 May 1909 and launched the *Karmayogin* on 19 June. Clearly, he didn't allow the grass to grow under his feet. Speeches, consultations, exhortations — his mere presence — and now this weekly paper! The bureaucracy couldn't appreciate the shift in emphasis implied in the change from the *Bande Mataram* to the *Karmayogin*. Perhaps a trap

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 81 ³² *ibid.*, p. 83.

— a subtle and dangerous trap — was suspected in the change itself. Chafing at the earlier defeat in their attempt to get Sri Aurobindo convicted and now fuming and fretting because the incendiary author of *Bhavanī Mandir* was back among his young men and was doubtless engaged in some explosive new mischief, the bureaucracy wondered whether it would not be a good idea — since he couldn't be sent to the Andamans — to deport him at least to some inaccessible place. In particular, Sri Aurobindo struck the bureaucracy as a major impediment to India's acceptance of the proposed Reforms, and hence his removal from the political scene seemed an obvious remedy. Coming to know of these bright ideas, Sister Nivedita advised Sri Aurobindo either to go into secrecy or to continue his political activity from outside India. But Sri Aurobindo thought that it would be sufficient if he published a signed letter in the *Karmayogin*, clearly spelling out his views on the political situation generally and on the controversial Reforms in particular. This "Open Letter to My Countrymen", dated "July 1909", appeared in the issue of 31 July, and presented in bold and clear outline a policy for nationalist India. Sri Aurobindo began with the observation that a public man's position in "India today" was most precarious, and even after his recent acquittal there was no security against a fresh accusation or a recourse to the law of deportation. There were rumours too that a case for his deportation had been submitted to the Government. Sri Aurobindo therefore thought it advisable to address a letter to his countrymen:

In case of my deportation it may help to guide some who would be uncertain of their course of action, and, if I do not return from it, it may

stand as my last will and testament.³³

The Nationalist Party was very much there still, notwithstanding the blasts of repression; what it needed was a policy and a leader: "the first it may find, the second only God can give it". It was, however, a firm moral ground on which the Nationalist cause had to be reared, then as always:

The strength of our position is moral, not material.... The whole of the moral strength of the country is with us, justice is with us, Nature is with us. The law of God, which is higher than any human, justifies our action; youth is for us, the future is ours. On that moral strength we must rely for our survival and eventual success.³⁴

The ground being so strong, there was no occasion for "rash impatience". There was no virtue in defying the law for its own sake; on the contrary, "a respect for law is a necessary quality for endurance as a nation". Sporadic terrorist outrages had no doubt taken place, but even they were only "the rank and noxious fruit of a rank and noxious policy", and unless the authors of that policy (the alien bureaucracy) turned from their errors, nothing could prevent "the poison-tree from bearing according to its kind". The claim for Swaraj was a moral and spiritual one, and didn't admit of any admixture of hatred:

We find a bureaucratic administration, we wish to make it democratic; we find an alien government, we wish to make it indigenous; we find a foreign control, we wish to render it Indian. They lie who say that this aspiration necessitates hatred and violence. Our ideal of

³³ *Speeches*, p. 138. ³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 139.

patriotism proceeds on the basis of love and brotherhood and it looks beyond the unity of the nation and envisages the ultimate unity of mankind. But it is a unity of brothers, equals and free men that we seek, not the unity of master and serf, of devourer and devoured.³⁵

Such being the "ends", the "means" had to be inconsonance with them; the big change that had to be brought about would be accomplished through the methods of passive resistance:

The essence of this policy is the refusal of cooperation so long as we are not admitted to a substantial share and an effective control in legislation, finance and administration.³⁶

The strategy of "No control, no cooperation" was but an adaptation relevant to Indian conditions of the classic American war-cry, "No representation, no taxation". And the tactics of boycott, swadeshi, national education merely flowed from the main strategy.

There were, however, difficulties in making the national will articulate in expression and effective in action. A disunited Congress, divided on basic issues of policy and programme, was the first of the impediments. And there was also the question of accepting or rejecting the proposed Reforms. As Sri Aurobindo saw it, there was room for compromise on all questions without a surrender of the basic principles of the Nationalist party. In conclusion, he outlined this six-point programme: persistence, with a strict regard to law, in a peaceful policy of self-help and passive resistance; "No control, no cooperation with the Government"; a rapprochement with the Moderates wherever possible, and the reconstitution of a united

³⁵ *ibid*, pp. 141-2. ³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 144.

Congress; revival of the Boycott movement on an effective basis; extension of the programme to Provinces other than Bengal, and ultimately to the whole country; organisation of a system of cooperation which will not contravene the law and will yet enable workers to proceed with the task of self-help and national efficiency.³⁷

For all its eminent reasonableness, the "Open Letter" had in no way resiled from the position Sri Aurobindo had held before, but here was a closely-reasoned document that stated the Nationalist point of view with utter clarity, and when he met Nivedita next she told him that the "Letter" had had the desired effect and the Government had dropped the idea of taking action against him, at least for the present. In writing his "Letter", Sri Aurobindo had relied "upon an intuitive perception that the Government would not think it politic or useful to deport him if he left a programme which others could carry out in his absence".³⁸ He had indeed calculated correctly, and the "Letter" also greatly helped the Nationalist party by giving it both a policy and a programme. Taking advantage of the precarious "freedom" he still enjoyed, Sri Aurobindo led the Nationalist party at the District Political Conference held at Hooghly on the 6th and 7th September 1909. The main question at the Subjects Committee was the issue of acceptance or rejection of the Minto-Morley Reforms. The Nationalists, with their majority, were in a position to throw out the resolution moved by the Moderates, welcoming the Reforms. But the Moderate leaders threatened to secede, and so "to avoid a scission he (Sri Aurobindo) consented to allow the Moderate resolution to pass, but spoke at the public session explaining his decision and asking the

³⁷ *ibid*, pp. 153-4. ³⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 89-90.

Nationalists to acquiesce in it... so as to keep some unity in the political forces of Bengal".³⁹ The Nationalist delegates were understandably disappointed that they were being asked to forego their advantage, but nevertheless they accepted his decision and left the hall so that they wouldn't have to vote either way. The seasoned Moderate leaders thought it strange, and even felt a little humiliated, that having refused to listen to them, the Nationalists should have trooped out in disciplined silence at the bidding of Sri Aurobindo.

A few days later, the *Karmayogin* made an assessment of the results of the Hooghly Conference. For one thing, the situation at Hooghly wasn't strictly comparable to the one at Surat, where the order for the breaking-up of the Congress had to be given. Again, at Hooghly the Nationalists were in a position of commanding strength, and *therefore* they could the more easily afford to be generous to the other party. Under Sri Aurobindo's lead, the Nationalists were content to adhere to their "main point of securing some definite step in relation to the holding of an united Congress".⁴⁰ Proceeding next to attend the Sylhet District Conference, Sri Aurobindo addressed many meetings on the way, and spoke on politics as well as Sanatana Dharma. He was gratified to find that, in that distant part of East Bengal, Nationalism was vigorously alert and alive and Moderatism was practically extinct. As he wrote in the *Dharma* afterwards, "the people of Sylhet held a conference in the very birth-place of repression and proclaimed Swaraj as their goal and moral force and passive resistance as the means of attaining it".

The growing strength of the Nationalists as well as

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 59. ⁴⁰ The *Karmayogin*, 14 September 1909.

their apparent willingness to take the Moderates with them encouraged Surendranath Banerjea to make a move to bring the two parties together. This he did at Barisal, at the time of the Provincial Conference. If Banerjea could go to the next session of the Congress at Benares as the head of a united Bengali delegation, the Nationalists becoming his sword-arm or ginger group, he might be able to get the better of the right wing of the Moderates led by Gokhale and his friends. The private conference, however, came to nothing, for there were too many intractable problems to solve. To qualify for delegation to Benares, the Nationalists would have first to accept the undemocratic Constitution imposed on the Congress at Surat, and this Sri Aurobindo was not prepared to do. A "united Congress", then, seemed to be not possible of realisation; not, certainly, at that stage. The path taken at Hooghly had, after all, led to a blind alley. The Reforms had proved an apple of discord, and had hoodwinked many into a somnolent acquiescence in them. Sri Aurobindo knew better, but as for the Moderates they would feel the bitterness of the fruit only when they came actually to taste it. Such foreknowledge as was his could nevertheless be dismissed as of no consequence by the selfish and the easy-going alike. In that bleak climate of Indian politics, what was Sri Aurobindo to do? A 'Home Rule' movement strictly within the four corners of the existing law? An intense nation-wide movement of passive resistance? Neither appealed to him, the former because it would have meant a dilution of the ideal of Swaraj or Independence, and the latter because he felt convinced that the time was not propitious and he was himself not ready for such a mass movement.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 63-4.

Sri Aurobindo's brief period of political activity after Alipur — a matter of hardly ten months — saw him grow new dimensions of understanding and farseeing leadership. On the one hand there was the new stress on Sanatana Dharma and on integral national growth, and the hope and conviction that a changed and transformed India would be the Guru of the Nations; and, on the other hand, there was the clear grasp of the deteriorating political situation caused by the incarceration or deportation of the leading Nationalists, the eager anxiety of the Moderates to work the phoney Reforms, and the seething underground discontent finding expression in mere terrorism. Were the Nationalists to fight on two fronts — bureaucratic repression and terrorist activity — and decimate themselves to no purpose? On the one hand, there was the piling up of repressive measure on repressive measure, stifling the free expression of patriotic feeling whether in the press or on the platform; and on the other, there was a succession of daring acts like the killing of Nandalal Banerjea (who had arrested Prafulla Chaki), the attempt on Minto on 13 November 1909, and the assassination of Jackson, the Collector of Nasik, on 21 December. Repression and terrorism fatally incited each other and produced a terrifying chain-reaction. Where was room for honest and forthright Nationalism in such a vicious situation? It is only against such a twilight background of uncertainty that we should try to understand Sri Aurobindo's short spell of evangelism during the last months of 1909 and the opening months of the following year.

VI

Given the curious complex of political forces in the country, the ease with which the alien bureaucracy was apt to get panicky for no reason, and the extreme precariousness of a nationalist politician's life, Sri Aurobindo knew that he might any day be removed from the political scene (or he might himself have to remove himself!). It was part of wisdom to plan one's campaign of action as if one might live to be a centurion; but one had also to hold oneself in readiness to quit the scene any moment whatsoever. The fullness, the ripeness was all. It was in this mood of the *'sthitaprajna* that Sri Aurobindo made his varied contributions in verse and prose to the pages of the *Karmayogin*.

But, first, what exactly was 'Karmayoga'? What should be the "Ideal of the Karmayogin"? Sri Aurobindo wrote a series of ten articles on the subject, the first two appearing in the inaugural issue itself. These ten essays have since been collected, rearranged, and published as a book, along with two of Sister Nivedita's contributions, under the title *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*. Although written in a certain context and for a particular audience, the message is for all and comes to us — especially to the youth of India — with a pointed contemporaneous urgency. In the memorable exordium, Sri Aurobindo states his thesis with a characteristic succinctness and force:

A nation is building in India today before the eyes of the world... the freedom, unity and greatness of India have now become necessary to the world. This is the faith in which the Karmayogin puts his hand to the work and will persist in it, refusing to be discouraged by difficulties however immense and

apparently insuperable. We believe God is with us and in that faith we shall conquer.⁴²

The Karmayogin's mind is necessarily set on action, on change, or revolutionary transformation; it is not to be merely external or mechanical, but moral and spiritual. Salvation cannot lie in India trying to fabricate a toy model of European freedom, with bicameral legislatures, colourless societies, secularist postures and materialist panaceas. It is not as the "ape of Europe" that Indian society can achieve social renovation, for "it is the spirit alone that saves, and only by becoming great and free in heart can we become socially and politically great and free".⁴³ Nor is there any sense in countenancing the emergence of new sects; they solve nothing, and only add to our problems or give further vicious twists to them. Religion and science, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, all have got hold of the Truth, some partially and others integrally. Hinduism, of course, is in a class apart:

In our own (religion), which is the most sceptical and the most believing of all, the most sceptical because it has questioned and experimented the most, the most believing because it has the deepest experience and the most varied and positive spiritual knowledge — that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life, which is not a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution, which rejects nothing but insists on testing and experiencing everything and when tested and experienced, turning it to the soul's use, in this Hinduism we find the basis of the future

⁴² *The Ideal of the Karmayogin* (Seventh edition, 1950), pp. 1-2.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 5.

world-religion. This *sanātana dharma* has many scriptures, Veda, Vedānta, Gita, Upanishad, Darshana, Purāna, Tantra, nor could it reject the Bible or the Koran; but its real, most authoritative scripture is in the heart in which the Eternal has His dwelling. It is in our inner spiritual experiences that we shall find the proof and source of the world's Scriptures, the law of knowledge, love and conduct, the basis and inspiration of Karmayoga.⁴⁴

Let the Hindu, let the Indian, look into the secret cavern of his heart and discover the perennial fount of spirituality. Matter needn't be denied, indeed it shouldn't be; but spirituality should be affirmed and accepted and realised as the deeper reality.

"Karmayoga" was simply "the application of Vedānta and Yoga to life". Vedānta and Yoga were nothing forbiddingly esoteric; nor were they limited to India. Already in 1909, they had exceeded their "Asiatic limit" and were beginning to "influence the life and practice of America and Europe". And Vedānta didn't mean a flight from life, and Yoga wasn't simply a series of exercises:

"Abandon all", says the Isha Upanishad, "that thou mayest enjoy all, neither covet any man's possession. But verily *do thy deeds in this world* and wish to live thy hundred years...." The Charioteer of Kurukshetra driving the car of Arjuna over that field of ruin is the image and description of Karmayoga; for the body is the chariot and the senses are the horses of the driving and it is through the bloodstained and mire-sunk ways of the world that Sri Krishna pilots the soul of man to Vaikuntha.⁴⁵

In the particular national context, the Karmayogin had

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 6-7. ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 15-6.

to guard against the only too common tendency to cling to every detail sanctioned by past practice:

In all life there are three elements, the fixed and permanent spirit, the developing yet constant soul and the brittle changeable body. The spirit we cannot change, we can only obscure or lose; the soul must not be rashly meddled with, must neither be tortured into a shape alien to it, nor obstructed in its free expansion; and the body must be used as a means, not overcherished as a thing valuable for its own sake. We will change no ancient form to an unreasoning love of change, we will keep none which the national spirit desires to replace by one that is a still better and truer expression of the undying soul of the nation.⁴⁶

Nationalism for Sri Aurobindo was a means for enriching and extending life, not for diminishing or destroying it as was attempted later by Fascism and Nazism. Sri Aurobindo clearly pointed out that, once India's nationalism had brought political order and economic prosperity to the country, it should "preserve itself in cosmopolitanism somewhat as the individual preserves itself in the family, the family in the class, the class in the nation, not destroying itself needlessly but recognising a larger interest".⁴⁷ A strong nation was one thing, but the totalitarian "god-state" was a very different thing; and the so-called, but really ungodly, god-state could only rise from the grave of the individual. But even the greatest individuals were mere instruments in the hands of the Divine, "inspired Texts (in Carlyle's words) of that divine Book of Revelations, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 32-3. ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

named history". Men in themselves were but helpless pieces of straw swaying hither and thither as the vagrant breeze intermittently disturbed them; they were great only to the extent the energy of Mahakali informed and inspired them, and carried them onward by the momentum of its own impulsion. In other words, "the greatness of individuals is the greatness of the eternal Energy within".⁴⁸ Ultimately it came to this: the true Karmayogin had the clue to "the stillness of assured sovereignty which commands the harmony of life"; in that calm, "right knowledge comes"; and "right knowledge becomes the infallible source of right action. *Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*". Having tempered, purified and perfected the instrument, the Karmayogin would do wisely to leave it in God's hands. Ridden by the Spirit within, the actions of the Karmayogin might puzzle the ordinary man. A wise passivity today, fire and brimstone tomorrow; in either case, he would but be following the inner Light of which others might be totally unaware. There is, of course, very real danger in all and sundry talking about their intuitions and inner voices and proclaiming themselves to be agents of the Divine. Sri Aurobindo was therefore careful to add that, not everybody, but only the man who had gone through the austere discipline of Yoga and communed with the Divine would be able to interpret His purposes and translate them into action. Everybody is potentially a great Karmayogin, but not everybody is aware of the indwelling God, and not everybody is able to pierce the crusts of egoism and false appearance and reach the illimitable power-house of the Spirit. Once man the seeker is awakened enough to realise that he is the heir to immortality and the agent

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

of the Divine, he becomes an irresistible leader of mankind; he is irresistible because he is guided by a Power, he becomes a Power, which no other merely human agency can stand against; he is irresistible being now himself the arm of the eternal Consciousness-Force. He, the great Karmayogin, is in fact God manifesting Himself to average humanity; he has caught a glimpse of Infinity and seen in it both the auspicious God and the terrible God:

The God of Wrath, the God of Love are one,
 Not least He loves when most He smites. Alone
 Who rises above fear and plays with grief,
 Defeat and death, inherits full relief
 From blindness and beholds the single Form,
 Love masking Terror, Peace supporting storm.
 The Friend of Man helps him with Life and Death,
 Until he knows. Then freed from mortal breath
 He feels the joy of the immortal play;
 Grief, pain, resentment, terror pass away.
 He too grows Rudra fierce, august and dire,
 And Shiva, sweet fulfiller of desire.⁴⁹

VII

Apart from *The Ideal of the Karmayogin* group of essays, the paper also published some other sequences of articles that have since been collected as *The Brain of*

⁴⁹ From *Epiphany*, published in the *Karmayogin* of 18 December 1909, and now included in *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol II, p. 129. Two others poems, *Who* and *The Birth of Sin* (which appeared on 13 November and 11 December) have been discussed already in an earlier chapter (VII. 11 & 14). *Baji Prabhau*, which appeared in February-March 1910, has been discussed in Chapter V (iii).

India, The National Value of Art and A System of National Education. The Brain of India (which first appeared in October-November 1909), with its emphasis on the Brahmacharya-Yoga axis in education, has been referred to already in an earlier chapter (XI.i). *The National Value of Art* series appeared in November-December 1909, and *A System of National Education* followed in the early weeks of 1910. All these sequences bespeak Sri Aurobindo's constant preoccupation with the problems of right education in the context of the national resurgence. Sri Aurobindo's ideas on ends and means in the field of education were elaborated in later years, and the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry has been trying over a period of twenty-five years to serve as a pilot project to translate his dreams and ideals into practice. But the germs of the Aurobindonian conception of integral education can be seen even in the series of articles published in the *Karmayogin* over sixty years ago.

The core of Sri Aurobindo's educational thesis is in the following passage:

Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which God offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use.⁵⁰

The essential things cannot really be "taught", they can only be helped to flower, as the sun's rays warm the bud to spread itself out petal by petal. "The teacher is

⁵⁰ *A System of National Education* (included in *On Education*, by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, 3rd edition, 1966), p. 11.

not an instructor or task-master", says Sri Aurobindo; "he is a helper and a guide". And in education, as in other activities, the child should be helped to develop in accordance with his own *svabhāva*, or complex of in-born aptitudes, and not as the teacher or the parent peremptorily desires. But although self-education is the secret of all true education, the teacher might still provide the catalysis and create the proper atmosphere for the child:

The best method of suggestion is by personal example, daily converse and the books read from day to day.... This is a kind of good company, *sat-saṅga*, which can seldom fail to have effect so long as sententious sermonising is avoided, and becomes of the highest effect if the personal life of the teacher is itself moulded by the great things he places before his pupils. It cannot, however, have full force unless the young life is given an opportunity, within its limited sphere, of embodying in action the moral impulses which rise within it.⁵¹

Sri Aurobindo distinguishes in the functioning of *buddhi* or the intellect two complementary groups of faculties:

The faculties of the right-hand are comprehensive, creative and synthetic; the faculties of the left-hand, critical and analytic. To the right-hand belong judgement, imagination, memory, observation; to the left-hand comparison and reasoning. The critical faculties distinguish, compare, classify, generalise, deduce, infer, conclude; they are the component parts of the logical reason. The right-hand faculties comprehend, command, judge in their own right, grasp, hold and manipulate. The right-

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 17-8.

hand mind is the master of the knowledge, the left-hand is its servant. The left-hand touches only the body of knowledge, the right-hand penetrates its soul. The left-hand limits itself to ascertained truth, the right-hand grasps that which is still elusive or unascertained. Both are essential to the completeness of the human reason. These important functions of the machine have all to be raised to their highest and finest working-power....⁵²

A still higher range of faculties, exceeding those of both the right-hand and the left-hand, also await exploration and mastery: "sovereign discernment, intuitive perception of truth, plenary inspiration of speech, direct vision of knowledge to an extent often amounting to revelation, making a man a prophet of truth". The teacher's tasks would be to understand the way of nature, to open up possibilities, to put the child in the way of self-growth in consonance with his *svabhāva* and the nation's genius, and to include in the regiment the whole arc of education comprising the physical, vital, mental, moral and spiritual; and yet the teacher has to limit himself, all the time, to playing the paraclete, putting the "growing soul into the way of its own perfection".

In the six essays on 'The National Value of Art', Sri Aurobindo has differentiated between the three uses of Art: the purely aesthetic; the intellectual, educative or moral; and the spiritual. The aesthetic appeal, the sense of the beautiful exemplified through the play of colour, form, rhythmic and symbolic sound, has helped savage man to become the civilised man. But Art can also bring about *katharsis*, *cittasuddhi* or *purification*, and herein lies its educative or moral appeal:

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 14

Poetry raises the emotions and gives its separate delight. Art stills the emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction.... Music deepens the emotions and harmonises them with each other. Between them, music, art and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make and keep its movements purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious.⁵³

Higher still is the service of Art in awakening or satisfying the spiritual being or in advancing the growth of spirituality in the race:

Spirituality is a single word expressive of three lines of human aspiration towards divine knowledge, divine love and joy, divine strength, and that will be the highest and more perfect Art which, while satisfying the physical requirements of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal beauty, the emotional demand of humanity, the portrayal of life and outward reality, as the best European Art satisfies these requirements, reaches beyond them and expresses inner spiritual truth, the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal creation.

This is what Indian Art alone attempted....⁵⁴

Sri Aurobindo ends with the plea that "the spirit of old Indian Art must be revived" so that the whole nation may be "lifted again to the high level of the ancient culture — and higher".⁵⁵

Such, then, were his searching backward glances into India's past, such his significant explorations and find-

⁵³ *The National Value of Art* (4th edition, 1953), pp. 43-4.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 49-50. ⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 61.

ings; and such too was his clear vision of the unfolding future — “high... and higher”! Stationed on the perilous ridge of the ambiguous present, Sri Aurobindo yet commanded a view of both past and future in their incandescent vividness. He had come to the world with a mission: not simply to dream dreams nor to see uplifting visions alone, but rather to pass from dream to supreme exertion, and from Vision to definitive Realisation. Hadn’t the time come for him to shake off the clinging dust of the frustrating present and boldly take a leap into the Future? He listened with his stilled soul, he waited for the divine command. The Mother of the Radiances was dawning on the horizon, the unpredictable *ādeś* was being initiated by a sovereign compulsion. And the Karmayogin was expectant in the poise of utter readiness to break out into “another Space and Time”.